

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

—Robert Frost, 1916

Prologue

London, England: January 1, 1981

Anita Hartz rang in the New Year at a local bar with her best friend, Paige Wyckham. They had just finished their first semester of first year at Oxford majoring in English, both hoping to be teachers one day. The two instantly hit it off in the first lecture, and had hung out ever since, especially learning that they came from the same neighbourhood in Swansea.

The two staggered out of the bar as it neared 3 am, laughing and giggling over a group of students' latest commentary on their most hated Professor. Paige was leaning against Anita, her arm slung over

Anita's back to hold her upright. Paige was, after all, more of a drinker than Anita would ever be.

"Alright, Paige?" Anita asked. She only had a pint and was the designated driver for the evening, happily giving her best friend all the drinks she wanted, with a new bottle of Tylenol at the flat waiting for her.

"Sure," slurred Paige, giggling. They giggled together in the silence of the evening as other late-night stragglers wandered off in London, looking for their next party or a bed.

The two walked slowly down a narrow cobblestone lane, quietly giggling and looking for the nearest tube station. As they turned a corner, they heard a distant, but distinct, shout and stopped.

Although Paige was fairly gone, she had enough street-sense to sober herself up as much as possible. Anita, on the other hand, froze, and started to hyperventilate when multicolour beams of light sailed through the air. A tall, young man came barrelling around the corner, panting heavily, nearly running into the two women.

"What are you doing here?" he gasped. "Run! Death Eaters!"

Perplexed, Paige was going to ask him what he meant by Death Eaters, when he grabbed her other side and began tugging the two girls after him, back the way they came.

Briskly as a group with a drunk could be, they made it to the same bar they had vacated earlier, and entered. There was still a large after-two crowd, who were no longer drinking but singing rowdily and watching the telly: a foreign football game was on. The man they were with sunk heavily into a booth, facing the bar door but half-hidden in shadows.

Paige looked curiously at him and slurred, "What's a Death Eater?"

The man whipped his head around to face the two women before groaning. He hid his face in his hands. "Muggles!"

“Pardon?” asked Anita, blinking. She was very confused, what exactly was a Muggle or a Death Eater? She asked as much.

The man leaned forward and said, as quietly as possible with force behind his words, “you must believe me – there is a world out there, hidden underneath your nose that would never believe exists.”

“Kind of like an underground society, then?” asked Anita.

The man nodded. “Yes. But imagine that they hide themselves amongst you. And imagine that they can do magic, where spells exist, where dragons and witches and wizards are real.”

Paige nodded along drunkenly. “I once thought I saw a dragon!” She hiccupped.

“Oh?” the man asked, raising an eyebrow.

She nodded. “I was nine an’ mum an’ dad an’ I were in Norway an’ this huge beast of a thing landed in the water and snapped a fishing boat in two!” She frowned. “We left immediately afterward, leaving our tour guide, an’ when we met up with him again he couldn’t remember the dragon, but we could.”

The man nodded. “Norwegian Ridgeback. Nasty blighters they are.”

Anita stared. “Ok, let’s humour you, and say that this world is real – who are Death Eaters?”

The man sighed. “Just like how your world has its good and bad guys, so does the magical world. And the Death Eaters are the worst of the lot.”

Paige opened her mouth to ask another question, but the man (who was looking out the bar window) gave a startled jump, and slipped a stick onto the table just as the door burst open and a voice exclaimed, “Avada Kedavra!”

A green light flashed across the room and the bartender fell to the floor, with the glass he was cleaning shattered next to him.

Following that was panic.

People began running to the doors, any exit they could find, the bathrooms, breaking windows – Paige took a step away from the booth and was swallowed by the mass of people still in the bar.

“Paige!” cried Anita, sliding across the booth seat. “Paige!”

The man reached out and grabbed her arm. “No! They’ll kill you! Your friend should be fine.”

He then motioned for her to hide under the table, following him. He fingered his stick – Anita thought it would be a wand, if he was telling the truth – and began to murmur under his breath.

He then turned to face Anita, and she sucked in her breath, startled by the intensity of the man’s face. “I’m sorry you got dragged into this,” he said. “They hate anyone non-magical, and those born from non-magical parents. Bigots, prejudice arses they all are. Just remember, we’re not all like them!”

He then turned back to face the laughing group of seven, ready to spring out from his hiding place.

“Wait!” Anita called. “Who are you? Can I at least thank you properly?”

The man looked back and frowned, before saying, “I’m Matthew. Matthew Blake.”

Anita nodded, and the man left. She couldn’t see, but she could hear. She could hear the cries of patrons in the bar, their screams of terror and sobs. She could hear a bunch of weird words and phrases shouted back and forth and things exploding and the telly bursting into a shower of sparks and cables.

All too soon or far longer that she initially thought, the bar fell silent save for four loud cracks that filled the air. Holding her breath, Anita counted to thirty and then counted some more until she heard the

wail of police, fire and ambulance sirens. She then crept out from under the table, and felt her eyes begin to tear up at the carnage in front of her.

Bloodied bodies lay in the room, a few breathing shallowly and in need of medical attention. As Anita stumbled around bodies and slipping on glasses and beer bottles, she came across one person she had hoped had escaped.

“Oh, oh no... Paige...”

The medics found her sobbing next to her best friends’ corpse.

London, England: November 1, 1981

Anita was shopping for her parents’ Christmas present, even though it was two months in advance. Her studies were taking up a lot of her time and she wanted to take advantage of the break she had to get her shopping done now instead of later.

The streets were unusually crowded in downtown London, with people wearing crazy mismatched clothing and wearing robes and pointed hats. Anita didn’t think much of it, until a group of elderly women passed by, their faces bright and animated.

“– Praise be! You-Know-Who is finally gone!”

“All thanks to that young Potter boy –”

“– Poor dear... orphaned, no parents anymore –”

“– Muggles don’t seem to ever understand –”

Anita stopped, and turned to face the women, calling out loudly, “Excuse me?”

The three, all wearing those funny robes and pointy hats, looked at her blankly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to overhear, but you... you said ‘Muggles.’ Do you mean non-magical people?” Anita was grasping at straws. For days after Paige’s death, and weeks following that, she almost didn’t believe that magic was real and that Matthew Blake had kept her safe. But she could never forget that New Years Day, even if she wanted to. Those scenes still visited her in her dreams.

The three women shared uneasy glances, but Anita interrupted quickly. “No, please, I’m a Muggle, but my friend, we were attacked earlier this year by Death Eaters—”

One woman let out a murmur. “You poor thing, survived, did you?”

Anita nodded.

The other two murmured their own condolences and one pursed her lips before looking around. She stepped forward and wrapped her arm around Anita and asked, “Can you take a walk with us, dear?”

Anita nodded again, feeling foolish. She was far too trusting. “I can finish my Christmas shopping later.”

With the older women congregating around her, they walked off, and Anita learned more about the wizard world than their government wanted Muggles to know about, especially without any family involved in their world.

London, England: June 23, 1984

Anita had grown close to her elderly witches, and spent every free weekend she could in London having Sunday tea at the Leaky Cauldron. Initially surprised to find such an establishment existed, she quickly grew to enjoy the quirks of the wizard world and found herself defending non-magical people – she took a quick disliking to the term “Muggle” as she considered it derogatory term – from prejudiced wizards.

Her matrons were Augusta Longbottom (whose son and daughter-in-law were tortured to insanity just days after she first met them), Matilda Warbeck and Michaela Davis, who happily informed her of

the comings and goings of the wizard world and when they learnt Anita wished to be a teacher, began telling her tales of Hogwarts.

And after each one, she found herself getting more and more upset.

The wizard world seemed to completely neglect muggleborns, who give up seven years of their life only to be disregarded because of their background. There was also a high illiteracy rate in young wizards and witches who did not receive the proper help when their ailments were discovered.

When Anita began to explain how non-magical children were educated, and how Hogwarts should offer more courses, Ms. Longbottom quipped, “Why don’t you do something about it, dear? You are going to Canterbury Christ Church for your PGCE this upcoming September, and will be a licensed teacher in the eyes of England and Scotland.”

Anita was floored; she would be a teacher and could do something! It was then with Ms. Longbottom’s words, and Ms. Warbucks’ and Davis’s encouragement that Anita got through her ten-month program, while planning on opening a new school for witches and wizards – one where they would receive a far greater education than Hogwarts offered.

London, England: May 6, 1985

Anita finally graduated from Christ Church and had spent the past month writing her proposal for the Wizengamot and the Minister of Magic.

Ms. Longbottom had graciously pulled a few strings and Anita had a date for when she was to pitch her proposal for a new wizard school in southern England.

Nervous, but resolute, Anita began her presentation by listing the curriculum of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang, before beginning on her own elementary and secondary education, citing differences and similarities. She then explained what she would teach

her school, why each subject was important, and how they could use the skills her school would teach in real life scenarios.

The entire body of witches and wizards seemed entirely unmoved, especially Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, but Anita ploughed on, and on, showing diagrams and giving lesson plan examples; she cited teaching theorists and ESL methods until she was red in the face and when her voice was hoarse and her body fatigued.

“Thank you, Ms. Hartz,” said a witch named Amelia Bones. “You’ve given a thorough and detailed presentation.” The more polite members of the board clapped. “You will receive our answer within a few weeks.”

Anita was dismissed, and more than a little dismayed.

Swansea, Wales: May 22, 1985

Anita knew she didn’t sway the wizards; they were too far set in their archaic and strict ways of life to think about integrating a new school system – it went against Hogwarts, which was steeped in tradition, and insulted their very race.

Unhappy, Anita begged off two Sunday teas with her favourite ladies, opting to stay at her parents’ country house while looking for teaching opportunities in the local paper.

Lounging peacefully on an outside chair, Anita was more than a little startled when a brown owl swooped down next to her, with a letter attached. Still fairly wary about owl communication, Anita thanked the bird, who flew away, and unfolded the square piece of parchment.

Dear Ms. Hartz,

While you did not meet with me during your presentation of May 6th, please know that I was watching from the observation stands – as my status and name allow me to do. Do not be alarmed Ms., as this is merely an informal letter from me to you, with certain propositions involved that I believe to be mutually beneficially.

You see, my name is Nicolas Flamel, and with the sway that I and other certain members of the Wizengamot have, I am pleased to be the first to say that you have the go-ahead, with Ministry approval, to construct your proposed school...

On November 28, 1985, the Wyckham Academy of Magical Learning was technically open, with all construction completed. By December 14, all major International wizard and non-magical newspapers had advertisements for open teaching positions ranging from biology to alchemy, physical education/kinesiology to transfiguration, and art/music to wizard law and politics.

By the end of January 1986, the first round of hiring took place, under the careful eyes of Anita Hartz, Nicolas Flamel, Augusta Longbottom and Michaela Davis. Anita was overly happy and surprised to see that her New Years Day saviour, Matthew Blake, was an entrepreneur and CEO of Blake Communications: a Muggle-wizard public relations company. He was applying for the position of business and communications professor. Anita hired him on the spot, and then asked him to have coffee with her.

In March, the house elves were hired, the Muggle government had Wyckham Academy listed as a special education learning institute (where "we'll contact you if we're interested" was the motto), and Nicolas Flamel had set up a scholarship fund with Gringotts who were more than happy to accommodate the old and powerful wizard.

At the end of Hogwarts' 1986 school year, when they were sending the students home on the Hogwarts Express, Wyckham Academy sent out brochures to all muggleborn, half-blood and pureblood students at Hogwarts to explain about Wyckham Academy and their mission. Children who just turned eleven or were going to before December 31 were also contacted about Wyckham. The teacher applicants were all chosen and settling in to their new roles by this time, happily writing theory texts and conducting experiments before the school year began.

By July 1986, the professors of Wyckham Academy (a delicious mix of purebloods, half-bloods, muggleborns and non-magical staff

totalling 35) were travelling all over the UK to visit with families who inquired about Wyckham Academy.

By mid-July, Wyckham had enrolled 20 first years, 13 second, 8 third, 16 fourth, 22 fifth, 7 sixths, 4 seventh years, and 2 recent Hogwarts graduates who were interested in Wyckham's optional "eighth" year.

By the time the 1986-87 school year finished, the Wyckham graduates were praising the Academy and more students enrolled for the upcoming year.

From there on, Wyckham Academy became Hogwarts' main competition.

Harry Potter, turning eleven in three weeks, always knew he was special – but never in his right mind did he actually believe he was this special!

A week ago, at the beginning of July, a brochure and information package had been sent to Number 4, Privet Drive, addressed to his Aunt and Uncle, care of Harry Potter.

At first they had been surprised, but not too surprised. His elementary school had mentioned in his report card that they would possibly be sending his and Dudley's school records to the house as Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had not specified where the two preteens would go to for their secondary education.

When Vernon and Petunia had opened the package though, they were surprised by the official notification letter on cream paper, which was printed out specifically for Harry's guardians with reference to his name. They were surprised by the colourful multi-page pamphlet that had pictures of students in a high-tech science lab, wearing lab coats, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the library, and indoor gym and swimming pool. But there were other pictures as well: pictures of students waving sticks and working over cauldrons, flying around on broomsticks in the air, playing some sort of sport.

At first Uncle Vernon wanted to chuck the brown envelope and its contents, but Petunia said something that caused both Harry and Dudley – who were eavesdropping – to start.

“This isn’t from Hogwarts, Vernon; it’s not from the school my sister went to!” Petunia whispered harshly. “Look at the pictures; read the letter sent along by the Headmistress, they combine normal classes with those freakish ones!”

“Do you think that freakish school will send the boy a letter as well?” asked Vernon gruffly.

“It’s possible.”

“And what are your feelings on this, Pet?”

Harry held his breath. Would he finally learn about his past? His parents?

“I would rather the boy go to this Academy place than Hogwarts. It looks better than what Lily used to say, at the very least. I suppose it’s the boy’s choice.”

Aunt Petunia didn’t sound all that happy to say that, though.

And a week later, his Aunt Petunia called up the information phone number for Wyckham Academy. A day after that, the Headmistress/English professor was sipping Earl Gray, commenting happily on the furniture to Aunt Petunia.

“Harry? Are you all right?” the woman, Anita Hartz or Professor Hartz as his Aunt wanted him to call her, asked.

Dazed, Harry could only murmur in reply, “I’m a wizard?”

Anita glanced at his Aunt, who sat stiffly in an armchair, staring at the wall. Not finding any help there, Anita began to ease Harry into the world she had been introduced into five years earlier.

Anita told him of his parents – what she knew from gossip and fact – and about Hogwarts, while trying not to put it down too much (it wasn't really her fault that Wyckham snatched up the majority of muggleborns and a good deal of talented purebloods and half-bloods, it was just a better school!).

Harry took it all with a grain of salt, eager to impress Anita by not lashing out at his Aunt for hiding most of this information from him his whole life. Finally, Anita began to point out things of interest at Wyckham Academy and explain the optional year.

It was sometime during their conversation that Petunia retrieved the mail, and with it, came Harry's Hogwarts letter.

Anita did her best to explain the letter, similar to how Ms. Longbottom explained it, and fell silent. Petunia watched Harry with narrowed eyes while Harry bit his lip, thinking about which school to go to.

Finally, he looked up and said, "I've made my decision."

Petunia sat stiffer than before, her eyes were fixed firmly on her young charge. Anita put down her tea cup and gave Harry Potter all her attention.

Harry took a deep breath, put down both acceptance letters and the Wyckham Academy pamphlet. He then said, while looking Anita in the eyes, "I choose your Academy, Professor."

Unfortunately, it seemed his Aunt and Uncle were very eager to have Harry shipped off to a boarding school for ten months of the year, and asked if it were possible for him to leave immediately.

Anita, flustered, answered, "Well, of course, technically, Harry did choose Wyckham..."

Vernon swelled and said heavily, "Then he can bloody well go now, right Professor?"

Anita, trapped, nodded in surprise, and watched as Harry retrieved his meagre belongings from a hallway cupboard. Now suddenly

furious, Anita asked Harry to wait for her outside so they could go to London and buy his school supplies.

Once he was gone, Anita rounded on the Dursley's so fast, she nearly lost her balance. Threatening them with Child Services and the Regional Surrey Police, Anita explained that there would be hell to pay, and she promised they would be hearing from her again in the near future about their charges' neglected welfare.

Without waiting for a reply, Anita strode out the door, ignored an old woman in a shawl, and unlocked her BMW for Harry to enter.

She didn't talk until they were twenty minutes from the Dursley's residence.

"What's your favourite school subject, Harry?" she asked, trying to sound bright, and forcing the dark thoughts swirling through her brain into a corner for later evaluation.

The boy shrugged. "Dunno, really. The Dursley's weren't happy when I came home from school with better grades than Dudley so I stopped trying. It helped when I missed school."

"Was there something you liked before that happened?" asked Anita, scolding herself for thinking about making a U-turn and running the family over 'accidentally' if she came upon them.

"I did like English, because I like reading. I'm a good runner, too, so any exercise was nice."

Hoping to brighten the young boy up, Anita chirped, "Well, Wyckham Academy does have mandatory exercise classes for all students, to keep obesity down and our students fit. One is a heavy-duty course that is geared toward body-building and strength, where you complete an obstacle course and work out at the gym. First years won't have a detailed regime, but it does help overall. It includes martial arts and street fighting. The other option is a dance class, where you learn steps from swing and jive to Latin ballroom and hip hop. Both are vigorous," she added to Harry, facing him at a red light.

“Which would you suggest for me?” he asked. “As it’s mandatory?”

Frowning, Anita shrugged and pressed on the gas when the light turned green, and a few minutes later, turned on the M5. “It really depends if you join any clubs. For any of the sport clubs, like duelling, Quidditch, or even football teams, you should take the physical one, not the dance.”

“I don’t really play sports, though.” Harry seemed disappointed by this.

“You said you can run well,” commented Anita. “Perhaps you can also kick a ball at the same time and be an awesome footballer!”

Anita led Harry toward the Leaky Cauldron, humming the Macarena. “Non-magical people are called ‘muggles’ by the magical world and they can’t see Leaky unless it’s pointed out to them.”

“Is this how you get to Diagon Alley?” asked Harry, smoothing down his jet black hair.

Anita nodded. “There’s a brick wall in the back; when you have your wand, you tap the correct pattern on the bricks and the wall opens up.”

“So what happens when you don’t have a wand?” asked Harry, slightly alarmed. Hartz introduced herself earlier as a straight non-magical person.

Anita laughed. “The barkeeper, Tom, knows me pretty well. Also, Auggie will be there with some muggleborns to show them around, so we coordinated our times.”

“Auggie?”

“Augusta Longbottom. Her grandson, Neville, is your age. Actually, his birthday is a day before yours. He’s also going to Wyckham,” commented Anita, holding the door open for Harry. Whispering, she added, “Move quickly, and don’t say your name. You remember what I said about the rabid ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ syndrome these people have.”

Harry grinned, remembering, and moved quickly toward an elderly lady in a vulture hat. She was speaking to a group of parents, their children listening avidly. A chubby boy with brown hair was at her side, looking embarrassed and lonely. He had apparently heard all this before.

“Hi Auggie,” said Anita, waving slightly, “got another to add to the group.”

Augusta nodded, smiling pleasantly. “And this, ladies and gentlemen, is Anita Hartz, the Headmistress and English professor at the Academy.”

Anita made introductions, as Harry moved to the boy’s side.

“I’m Harry Potter,” he said, offering a hand.

“N-Neville L-Longbottom,” the boy stuttered. He seemed to be in awe.

Harry sighed. “I’m just Harry, really. Until two hours ago, I didn’t know I was also the Boy-Who-Lived.”

Neville’s eyes went round, but he nodded anyway. “A-Are you going to W-Wyckham Academy too?”

Harry smiled. “Yeah, it looked better than Hogwarts did. Are you going because your grandmother knows Hartz?”

Neville shrugged, now seemingly getting over his previous awe of the black-haired boy. “Gran isn’t too happy with Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, lately. He keeps sending letters to Anita, insulting her courses and complaining about how Hogwarts is turning into a pureblood school because she gets all the muggleborns.”

Harry frowned. “That doesn’t sound too nice. Hartz was pretty unbiased when she described Hogwarts to me. I just liked all the courses offered at Wyckham compared to the smaller amount at Hogwarts.”

“Wyckham’s got a huge list of courses,” agreed Neville, glancing at the bushy-haired girl who was tuning in to their conversation. “First and second year is pretty much the same, but in third year you can start adding electives.”

“How do you know all this?” the girl asked, in a slightly bossy tone. Harry was wondering as well.

Neville blushed. “Anita Hartz, the headmistress, is a good friend of my Gran. She was my babysitter while in university. You could say she’s my honorary Aunt.”

Harry smiled again. “Lucky you, you know what to expect!”

Neville smiled back. “Not really, Anita would just gloss over things or look at files while with me. She’s helped me with a few basics, but it wasn’t until my uncle dropped me out of a window that my family realized I was a wizard and not a squib!”

“Squib?” asked Harry, while the girl gasped, “out a window?”

Neville blushed again. “A squib is a person born into a magical family but without any magical powers. And most wizard families do something to get the magic in their children... um... shown, I guess? That why I was dropped out a window and bounced all the way down! Didn’t get a bruise!”

The girl looked ill, before shakily extending her hand. “I’m Hermione Granger. I’m a muggleborn, so I don’t know anything yet, but I really hope to learn so much...”

“Neville Longbottom,” replied Neville.

Harry shook the girls’ hand. “Harry Potter.”

Anita and Augusta called for attention and the large group entered Diagon Alley, moving to Gringotts first to exchange or take out their money.

Hartz said loudly, "I'll take a small group to Gringotts and move in the opposite direction as Ms. Longbottom, so we aren't one large group moving from one spot to another. Harry – you're still with me. Anyone else?"

Neville moved to Hartz when his Gran motioned for him to, and Hermione tugged on her parents' hands. Two others joined the group.

"Great, let's go," said a cheery Hartz. On the way to the glowing white building, (that was slightly lopsided) Hartz explained the monetary system, an unbiased view of Goblins (which she then compared to the biased view most wizards had), and a brief history of Gringotts.

Neville was happily filling Harry and Hermione in about the do's and don'ts and the how-to's of the wizard world, explaining their courtesy rules and the traditional Pureblood ranks. Harry was mildly surprised to find out that as the last surviving Potter he ranked as a Duke.

Of course, then Neville explained that the heredity titles were merely for show, so despite being a Duke, Harry had virtually no power. The English purebloods held more respect for the titles because it was a throwback to bygone days when tradition meant everything, so Harry could expect to be addressed as "His Grace," every once in a while.

Unfortunately, when Harry inquired about his family's status – thanks to Neville explaining his "rich, celebrity" Boy-Who-Lived title – Harry wanted to know about the family vaults and business ventures. The goblin, mildly surprised at the young human who wished to know everything, said, "Goblin Vergsnak is the head of Wizard Liaisons, he can direct you to an accounts manager."

Harry followed the goblin's pointy finger to a lone goblin, which if Harry was entirely truthful with himself, looked very bored, and was stamping papers dully.

"Thank you," he replied politely, and told Hartz. She nodded and said not to take too long, but he had a good half-hour; the non-magical parents and children were taking a little longer setting up direct funds transfers and accounts for their children.

Harry explained what he was hoping to learn to Vergsnak when he was told to come to the counter. Vergsnak seemed very surprised, but nodded thoughtfully.

“It is understandable, Mr. Potter. Let me check my records as to who oversaw your finances. You wouldn’t happen to have your key, would you?” Vergsnak asked.

Harry frowned. “Key? I’m sorry, Mr. Vergsnak?” at the goblin’s stare, Harry changed the honorific. “No then, Goblin Vergsnak. I never received a key to enter my vaults. I wasn’t aware I even had a vault until today, coming here.”

Vergsnak looked floored, and frowned, his pointy teeth grinding together. “Very well, this is very distressing.” He held out a tiny rectangular onyx box, with a round opening at one end. “Place your finger in there. It’ll take a blood sample, which will verify you are Harry Potter.”

Harry followed the instruction, watching in awe as the box glowed blue, and handed it back to the impatient goblin.

“Very good, Mr. Potter. Right this way,” Vergsnak had left his counter, placing an ‘Out of Service’ sign in cursive script on the top, and motioned for Harry to follow him off to a darkened side of the bank. Slightly wary, Harry did so.

Instead, as they rounded a corner, they entered a well-lit library-like room. The room was long and filled with black granite and glowing white marble; tapestries of goblins fighting others hung proudly behind lower counters where goblins spoke with others in hushed voices or looked over large stacks of paper and ledgers.

Vergsnak stopped at one of the counters half-way down the room. The name plaque for this goblin was ‘Goblin Grosberg, Wizards’ Accountant.’ Harry started; he wasn’t aware rich wizards had accountants.

“What is it, Vergsnak?” asked Grosberg.

“Mr. Potter has requested an oversee of his family’s accounts, Grosberg. Who is in charge of them?”

Grosberg frowned, reaching below eye-level and pulling on a drawer handle. He began looking through the papers, alphabetically, until he reached ‘P’ and pulled that folder out.

“Parker... Parkinson... Patil... Perks... Pitman... Pipers... and here we are: Potter.” Grosberg held out a single, small cream card. “The accountant in charge of the Potter estate was Goblin Ragger, who was dismissed in 1981 by a Mr. Albus Dumbledore.”

“What?” Harry yelped, slightly appalled and hysterical. He drew attention from goblins around, but didn’t apologize. “My family’s money has been sitting around, gathering some interest or being decimated because someone not involved in my family made a decision?”

Grosberg and Vergsnak shared a scowl. “This is a mistake, Mr. Potter,” admitted Vergsnak. “To have this happen and quietly so we goblins would not know; well, we apologise.”

“So what now?” asked a dismayed Harry.

Grosberg looked up from the paper. “I would suggest one of our best accountants, Mr. Potter. Archibald Wallace is a wizard who has worked for us since 1845. He takes on clients that we refer to, and before beginning to work on their accounts, swears a wizards’ oath to never do intentional harm to that family’s money.”

Vergsnak nodded. “That would be the best idea. Shall I take him up now?”

Harry glanced at his wristwatch and saw only ten minutes had past. “I can only do this for another twenty minutes or so. I’m on a bit of a tight schedule, if you don’t mind...?”

Grosberg nodded, and Vergsnak motioned for Harry to follow him again. Desperate to learn more, Harry began asking some of his own

questions that he learnt from Hartz while walking to Gringotts, to get a goblin's perspective.

Vergsnak seemed surprised to learn that Harry knew some very unbiased and favourable views of goblins, and the two engaged in a conversation about the wizard world, prejudice, history and viewpoints.

They reached Wallace's office soon, and Harry reluctantly said goodbye; Wallace had called, "Enter," so Harry turned the door handle and entered a lush gold, maroon and brown office.

Wallace was old; he had thinning, messy white hair, dull brown eyes, and a smirk on his face. His clothes were dated and creased, and Archibald Wallace gripped a wooden walking cane tightly in his right hand.

He was also standing by a window overlooking Diagon Alley, and only turned when Harry cleared his throat.

"My, my," the old man whispered, in a soft, gravelly voice. "You are completely a splitting image of that sly old dog, Rex Potter himself."

"Rex Potter, sir?" asked Harry, taking Wallace's offered client armchair.

Wallace grinned, "Your great-great-grandfather, Mr. Potter. Now, what can I help you with?" the man sank down into his own chair with a sigh of pleasure.

"My accounts sir; I wanted to learn more about them, but it seemed they've been in limbo since Albus Dumbledore told my family's previous accountant to bugger off."

Grinning at the curse, Wallace laced his fingers together and nodded. He snapped his fingers and immediately a small green creature popped into existence, carrying a large box. Wallace took the box, thanked the creature called Toppy, and began to pull out ledgers upon ledgers. The creature had since disappeared.

Wallace quickly scanned the latest financial records, humming and huh-ing, a frown becoming more and more prominent as the minutes crept by. It was nearing the twenty-minute mark since Harry left his school group; Wallace finally sighed and closed the ledger he was looking at.

“Mr. Potter, I give you my word as a wizard, and family man, that your family’s money will be safe from outside harm, and from any intentional harm that I could cause,” the man spoke in his gravely, serious voice, his wand in hand and glowing brightly.

Harry was in awe of the display, and felt something in his chest respond to the oath.

“Now that that is settled, let’s see what we can clean up here, quickly,” began Wallace. He began to scribble things in a new ledger with a pencil, explaining as he went along.

“So, Mr. Potter, your family has lost a lot of money due to the dismissal of your previous accountant, and due to money being lost in failing businesses. I understand that you are beginning your first year at... the Academy? Yes? Excellent, there is a man there by the name of Matthew Blake. He started and owns Blake Communications, an excellent PR company. PR companies like Blake Communications represent and promote other companies’ products in the business world, Mr. Potter.” Wallace peered at Harry. “Blake is also the business professor at the Academy, so I would suggest taking his business course when you enter your third year. It will prepare you for these accounts later on.

“You are entitled to withdraw 500 Galleons in total from your trust fund each month. The majority of this will go to the Academy as tuition, but you will have more than enough left over. I will be sending you monthly reports with advice on to which stocks to sell, buy, and which companies to sell off. In these reports you will also receive the total amount of monetary and liquid assets the Potter name holds, including ancestral homes. Does this make sense?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Harry, a little flustered.

Wallace sent a sheet of parchment across to Harry. "This is the current outlook of your accounts, Mr. Potter." He then slid across a new, crisp ledger and something that seemed to be a cross of a briefcase and a mini-trunk. "This is a Business Case. In it, you can store on shelves your monetary amount, or however you plan on separating items. It'll help keep things in order. Take it. The ledger is self-updating and will show the current value and interest in your vaults: your trust, and family."

Harry nodded.

"I will contact you again in a month, after your birthday. Hopefully we'll have more time later on in our relationship, and begin a wonderful relationship. Goodbye, Mr. Potter," finished Wallace, standing shakily, and holding out his hand. Harry shook it, grinning happily.

"The goblins have also left this for you," the man said, pointing to a pouch. "That is a good deal of money that will help you get your school supplies; be wary, it's mixed with Muggle currency, as the Academy goes to London for some items. Your trust vault key is also in there; goblins use it as a way of entering your vault to get money."

Harry, happily surprised, said, "thank you, sir, so much! This has helped me immensely."

"I'm glad," smiled Wallace. He let go of Harry's hand and then smirked. "By the way, Potter – Rex was an adventurer, you know. Always got into trouble, that bugger did, and he would drag me along with him. I daresay that you'll live up to him... I would look him up in Wizard Genealogy."

Harry nodded, taking the advice. He left soon after, and met up with Hartz, who had just finished with the Grangers.

"Okay?" she asked, concerned. Harry nodded.

"Superb."

Getting his textbooks was a hassle, especially with Hermione. She wanted to know everything, literally, and almost bought a copy of every book on the course list until third year – but her parents and Hartz stopped her, while Hartz pulled her aside and has a whispered conversation with the girl. Hermione seemed to deflate, but also nod in resolution. They seemed to have come to some agreement, because Hermione put back many of her books; she did, however, buy two that were not anywhere on the course list.

Harry decided upon a snowy owl from Magical Menagerie, and on Hartz's suggestion named her Hedwig (something about a notable witch in history). Neville had a pet toad, so he didn't buy anything. He did get a tube of dead flies for Trevor, though.

Harry was very excited about his wand. He wasn't sure what to make of Ollivander though. The man was scary: he was quiet and always whispering, but quite convinced that the perfect wand was out there for each child that came to his store.

When Harry stepped up, Ollivander remarked on his parents' wands, and began to thrust similar cores and woods at him. So far, Harry blew up a vase, shattered the front display window, blew up six wand boxes, snapped a wand in two by touching it, and had two vacant chairs shoot to the ceiling and shatter into billions of pieces.

Finally, Ollivander brought out a dusty box from the very back of his shop; he was muttering, "curious, very curious," over and over as Harry tried it. A glow surrounded his body: it was white while his wand emitted green, blue, and red sparks that took the shape of snitches and a bear-like dog.

"It is curious, Mr. Potter," remarked Ollivander on prompting of Harry, Hartz, and Hermione's part, "that this wand's core animal gave one other. And that wand where the core resides, I'm sorry to say, is in the wand that gave you that scar on your forehead."

Harry frowned. "Voldemort's wand."

Ollivander shushed him. "Wizards do not like hearing You-Know-Who's name. They fear it."

Harry shrugged. "It's just a name, but okay. How much is it?"

"Your wand will cost seven Galleons."

Harry was quiet for the rest of the purchases in Diagon Alley.

Because of the non-magical classes and Wyckham Academy's non-magical participation in events, uniforms were issued from an independent school clothing manufacturer in London centre.

Near that outlet factory was where the students could get their English texts (Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* and Berholt Brecht's play *Mother Courage & her Children*), and all their other non-magical texts.

They also laughed and enjoyed a free ice cream purchased by Ms. Longbottom and Hartz. While in London, Harry spent more time talking to Hermione with Neville, learning about her opinions and how to get around the city.

It was quarter past five when they finished getting their magical supplies and non-magical in London. The parents began ushering their children back toward Charing Cross to their parked cars or toward a mass transit system. Soon, Harry was left with Hartz near her BMW.

"To Wyckham?" she asked, after they loaded Harry's school supplies in the boot (except for his owl, which sat in her cage securely strapped in the back seat to avoid jostling).

Harry nodded firmly. "Hey, Professor?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Thank you."

Anita smiled. "It's never a problem, Harry."

TBC...

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Chapter One

Harry fell asleep somewhere near Crawley, worn out from the day's activities and revelations. As Anita neared Brighton, she shook Harry awake gently.

"Almost there, Harry," said Anita. "Are you ready to see Wyckham Academy? I hope it lives up to your expectations!"

Harry smiled. "I'm sure it will, Professor."

Anita glanced at the boy. "You can call me Anita, if you'd like. Or Hartz, I heard you saying that to Neville and Miss Granger."

Nodding, but not saying anything, Harry looked out the window at the trees going by; the sun had set hours ago, and everything was dark outside the car, undistinguishable images melding together.

Pulling off the A259 past city centre Brighton, Anita continued on a smaller, two-lane road for a half-hour before pulling off to a smaller road near Telscombe: this one was single lane, and filled with gravel.

"Wyckham is on nearly fifty acres of undeveloped land on the outskirts of Brighton. It used to be a summer manor home for Lord Pemberley, but he sold us the manor and helped with the funds to convert it to a school," commented Anita, slowing the car down. "He's a squib, and quite helpful. We asked if he's like to stay on as an overseer of the estate, and he's happily living in a small cottage on the south part of the property. Of course, he travels usually to the Pier in Brighton and the beach there often... so we allow our older students to go into the city on long weekends sometimes."

She fell silent, and Harry caught his first glimpse of Wyckham Academy. The gravel road leading in to the school was long and fairly straight, lined with thick, tall pine trees. The road curved after a length, and the trees disappeared; in front of him was the most beautiful building he had ever seen.

Brown brick, four stories high, Wyckham Academy had old-world charm, with ivy growing up the sides of the manor. Harry counted five chimney stacks, and could see a balcony and patio off to one side of the manor, where Anita was pulling up to a five-door garage shed.

“We’ll give you the tour tomorrow, in the daylight. The house elves will help with the luggage, there’s no need to worry about that. But let’s get Hedwig inside, shall we?” offered Anita, unbuckling Hedwig’s seatbelt from around the cage. “I’ll carry her.”

Slightly dazed, Harry followed Anita through a white side door, leading to a warm and cozy kitchen, lit by bright electrical lights. Little green creatures similar to the ones he saw at Gringotts bowed or curtsied when they saw Anita, who introduced Harry.

One elf, Floppy, offered to get Harry’s luggage, and bring it to the room Anita chose for him.

Walking out of the kitchen, Harry entered a lit and warm-toned hallway with moldings along the wood panel walls. Paintings hung in nice frames, and a statue would pop up on a stand every so often as they wandered the halls.

Pushing through a set of swinging double doors, Anita said, “This is the main entrance.”

Harry saw two large doors to his right, which were the main doors, and a double-staircase that started on the far side of the room and away from each other, meeting at the middle. They walked up the red carpeted stairs.

Harry yawned, too tired to observe his surroundings and anxious to fall asleep. Anita finally stopped in front of a light golden door, with two plaques that read ‘Harry Potter’ and ‘Blaise Zabini.’

“This is your room. You will share it with another boy once school starts,” explained Anita. “Until then, it’s all yours. Sleep well, Harry. When you’re awake tomorrow, just call out for Floppy, and he’ll show you to the kitchen or the Café for breakfast.”

“Night,” replied Harry, entering the room. He barely noticed Anita placing Hedwig’s cage on a dresser top, and opening the latch. He removed his glasses and set them on a nearby tabletop before falling in bed with his clothes on.

He was asleep quickly after.

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The next morning, Harry woke up near nine o’clock, according to the bedside clock on the night table. Properly awake, and able to see the room with his glasses on his nose, Harry observed his new bedroom.

His twin-sized bed was pushed up against the wall on the left side of the room; it had a night stand next to it with a clock and lamp on it. There was a single drawer near the top, and an empty shelf to place items on. Above his bed was a corkboard and a set of pushpins already stabbed in to it.

Across from his bed was a nice-sized desk and a comfy-looking office chair with a high back. There was a desk lamp, four empty shelves for books above the desk, and a shelf with four drawers built in to the bottom of the desk

Next to his desk was his dresser, which was a good height, and had four large drawers and two smaller ones side-by-side as the top drawer.

The main door acted as a separator for Harry’s side of the room to his roommates, which was identical to his side. The window separated the room as well, between the two nightstands. It was large and divided by a white metal beam. Harry opened it by sliding the bottom half of the window on his side up, letting in the fragrant, slightly salty summer sea air. The curtains surrounding the window were a sheer, gauzy white fabric, with a heavier blue fabric that could be pulled over to block out any light.

The ceiling was high and had a ceiling fan with light; above the dresser protruding from the wall was a sturdy hook: it was meant for

Harry to hang his owl's cage there. The walls were a neutral light blue colour, and the floor was a cushy dark blue carpet.

The main door had a small hallway, with a small wood area. Off on each side of the hallway by the door was a sliding mirror panel, which revealed a bar with hangers on it. A shoe rack was against the wall on the floor.

Overall, Harry was pleased, and even more so to find the trunk he bought in Diagon Alley at the foot of his bed, leaving ample room for him to swivel his desk chair about.

Harry began unpacking; his yearly non-magical clothing which he bought as a treat were neatly placed in the drawers, including underwear, socks, and sweaters. Harry's shiny new dress shoes, winter boots, and uniform shoes were placed on the shoe rack and his trainers were tossed in the closet. His school uniform, jackets, pants, extra Oxford shirts, dress jacket and trousers were placed on hangers in the closet.

Slowly, Harry placed his schoolbooks on the shelves, stuck up Hermione's phone number on his corkboard (she gave it to him before she left), and set out the food and water trays for Hedwig, who soared out the window when he opened it. He placed the Business Case and ledger from Wallace in the bottom drawer by his desk.

At 10:30am, Floppy appeared in the bedroom, startling Harry. "Would Mr. Potter like some breakfast?"

Harry nodded.

"Floppy can brings it here or Mr. Potter can comes to the kitchen or Café."

"Café?" asked Harry.

"Oh, yes," said an exuberate Floppy, clapping his hands. "The Café is the name for where the students and professors eat during school. Headmistress Hartz says it is 'open concept'!"

“Well, I’ll try that,” shrugged Harry, lacing his trainers up and following Floppy. As they left his bedroom, Harry memorized the hallways, and where the boy’s and girl’s bathrooms were located (the second door on his right after leaving his bedroom for the boy’s, and girl’s was on the opposite, including at the far end of the hallway).

Harry only had to go up and down one flight of stairs for classes and meals; apparently, as Floppy was explaining, the three floors were sometimes mixed depending on who was paired with who, but they were usually split by year. The top floor, which took up both wings (including the East which Harry was situated in) and manor core, was completely single-room occupancies.

“What are they for?” asked Harry.

“Once you’s are in fifth year, you’s have the option for a single room,” answered Floppy. “It’s for OWL and NEWT studies. Quiet time to study without a roommate to bother you’s.”

Floppy pointed out the Café door – two French style, clear glass doors. They were near the kitchen where Harry came in last night, and opened up to a very nice, bright and clean restaurant-styled room.

The windows in the room were floor-to-ceiling and occupied two entire walls; at waist height there were boxes attached to the windows filled with greenery. Tables with double, four, and ten occupancy were scattered around the room. On the other side of the room was an open window, which looked into the kitchen. In front of the window was a white-linen lined table.

“That’s where we’s put the food when school is in session. Headmistress says that’s buffet?” asked Floppy, as though confused.

Harry understood. “So that is why it’s called the Café! You pretty much pick what you want, sit where you want.”

Floppy nodded, his large ears flopping with him. Harry idly wondered if that’s how he got named.

“What’s would you’s like, Mr. Potter?” asked Floppy, as Harry sat at a four-person table.

“Um... bacon, eggs, and toast with orange juice?”

Thirty seconds later, Harry was enjoying his first breakfast of Wyckham Academy and enjoying every bloody minute of it.

Twenty minutes after he received his breakfast, Anita walked in with another man, greeting Harry warmly.

“Morning, Harry!” she said, sitting down next to him. “How’d you sleep?”

“Well, thank you,” swallowed Harry, finishing the last bite of his toast.

Anita smiled. “This is Nicolas Flamel, Harry. He’s our potions and alchemy professor. Nicolas, meet Harry Potter.”

“Nice to meet you, young man,” greeted Flamel in a soft voice. He was old, with white hair and dark eyes. His skin was tanned and he wore traditional wizards’ robes.

“Likewise,” agreed Harry, shaking the man’s offered hand.

“We’re going to be giving you a tour of the Academy. Afterwards, you’re free to do whatever you like, continue to poke around, ask any professors you see for directions or what they’re doing... don’t be shy to ask!” Flamel grinned. “It’s something we prefer our students to do – if you don’t understand, need something explained, want to argue with us about why something works; ask away. We don’t give detentions or take away or give house points like Hogwarts.”

Anita jumped in to the conversation. “Like I explained at your Aunt’s, Harry, we’re an academic school. We prefer having students looking for knowledge and enjoying themselves rather than being competitive... unless it’s for sports. We don’t reward or punish behavior unless it is called for, because we want our students to learn maturity and independence. I do understand it can be daunting,

especially for eleven-year-olds, but we believe Wyckham Academy students can handle it.”

“I understand,” said Harry slowly. “I can’t say I agree or disagree, as I haven’t experienced the system, but I do understand.”

Anita and Flamel shared a smile, and stood. “Ready to see the school, Harry?” asked Anita.

Harry nodded, and any stray thoughts of choosing Hogwarts never crossed his mind.

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By 4pm, Harry had seen everything in Wyckham Academy, including a break at the Café for lunch.

After leaving the Café in the morning, Harry saw the kitchens in better detail, and greeted Floppy personally, which caused the elf to start bawling (something to do with being treated so well by the Headmistress and Wyckham’s students over the time, and even more so by the Boy-Who-Lived, the great Harry Potter).

Next, he saw the two-floor library and was stunned by the floor-to-ceiling windows and shelves (some books were only accessible by climbing the tall ladders), the desks with privacy walls, the comfy couches and computerised help station.

The indoor gym was spacious: it was enlarged by magic to hold indoor Quidditch hoops and stands, and was large enough for an indoor football match as well. It was easily changed to allow students to play basketball or conduct martial arts classes as well.

Attached to the gym through a set of glass doors was the Olympic-sized swimming pool, and attached to the gym on the right of the pool was a glassed-in aerobics gym, with new, high-tech equipment.

Harry was then shown the room across from the gym which was the dance room – bars and slippery wooden floors, exercise mats and change rooms.

Next was the magical wing, called the West Wing. This was where all magic was to be performed, so there wouldn't be interference with electronic equipment. They had worked out the lights and TVs, but the computers were still iffy. It was across from what Anita called the Core – the middle of the manor.

Harry saw the potions lab, the transfiguration, charms and runes/arithmancy rooms. Theory magical zoology was done in a class, but there was a stable outside. Astronomy was also done outside, or in the conservatory on the fourth floor in winter. Again, he had made a full circle of the wing.

After leaving the West Wing, Harry saw the non-magical wing, called the East Wing (meaning, the majority of classes that didn't involve magic took place there). He saw the English room, the chemistry/biology lab and the physics room. He saw the business/communications room, with a TV showing the latest stocks. Harry saw the Art room, filled with easels and paint, the music room with numerous instruments and – Anita informed him proudly – was acoustically designed and soundproofed.

"In the Core we have other classrooms. Those are the interchangeable," explained Flamel.

"Interchangeable?" asked Harry.

Anita nodded. "Those are classes like philosophy, history, politics, and classes like that, that could be either magical or non-."

"We also have the teacher's lounge, the Common, and the theatre... oh, and the communication center."

So, Harry saw the interchangeable classes as well, and felt fairly comfortable inside the school. The teacher's lounge was pointed out in case of emergency (Anita assured him that wasn't likely: there were security cameras, heat sensors, and other magical wards to

detect intruders); the Common was a large room filled with bookcases, couches, armchairs, a fireplace, and study/work tables. A large TV with VCR was against a wall.

The theatre was brilliant; stuck behind the main stairs and half in the basement, the theatre was dark and had rows of red seats, a projection screen and stage. On Friday evenings, Wyckham would actually make popcorn, and students could relax and watch movies. At the end of the school year, those in the Theatre Club would put on a school production.

The Communication center was an area off the main hall where there were two fireplaces – for fire calls to magical families –, a row of telephones and two computers for students to check e-mails, which was apparently coming in vogue.

“Outside?” asked Anita.

Harry could only moan.

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Last night Harry couldn't tell how large the manor was, but in the daylight, he could easily see it. Much larger than Privet Drive, Wyckham Academy's Core was nearly a whole city block in length; with its East and West wings half the size of the Core, the Academy was impressive. Harry could tell how everything fit nicely inside.

Walking through the front doors, Harry looked over the large, grassy field with picnic tables and gardens. Tranquil, Harry could not hear any traffic or outside noise, other than birds and bees, and the noises of animals.

Flamel led him around toward the garage, and past that, on a stone pathway through an arch which connected the garage to the main building.

Behind the Core was nearly forty acres of unspoiled land – the other ten was the front lawn.

There were two large stables: one filled with horses and some farm animals, and the other with magical creatures like winged horses, an injured unicorn being nursed to health, (and as Anita explained to him) some crups, kneazles, and a pen for nifflers. Exotic creatures were brought in for the day if possible, or field trips made for students to go see them instead.

“We offer horseback riding courses, and past those greenhouses – that’s where the herbology and botany classes take place – and over that slight hill is the sports area,” explained Anita, pointing north.

They walked in a companionable silence, until they reached the crest of the hill. There, Harry could see the gleam of gold from the Quidditch hoops, and below that, a football field with the white lines drawn in already.

“We use the stands dually,” explained Anita, “And since Wyckham has a football team, they practice here... we don’t host games, not yet at least. We have to figure out if we can charm the Quidditch hoops invisible to non-magical folk first.”

“This... Wyckham Academy is brilliant,” said Harry, finally, as they entered the Core. “Thank you for showing me around.”

“No problem,” said Anita. “We’ll go over your course selection later or tomorrow, if you’d like. I’ll drop by your room, as I think it will get a little lonely until late August.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s only a month and a week.”

Anita smiled, but acted shocked, bringing her hand to her mouth in horror. “Still!”

Harry agreed to meet at eight in the Commons (give or take, depending on how long it took Harry to find it again), and would work on understanding his family’s finances.

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Choosing Harry's classes seemed fairly easy; when Anita came to his room, she pointed at his nightstand's top drawer where Harry discovered a Wyckham Academy Rules & Regulations book, a course selection pamphlet, and a "welcome" statement sheet of paper lay.

Harry took the course selection pamphlet and a notepad with him, and comfortably sat on the couch next to Anita in the Commons. Together, they finally worked out a schedule for Harry that he liked.

"Hogwarts has only five core courses: transfiguration, charms, defense against the dark arts, history, and potions. You'll take those," said Anita, "Plus English and maths."

"What about physical activities?" asked Harry.

"There are several sections to each gym class: A through E," explained Anita, pointing them out on his course selection sheet. "You pick whichever works best for your schedule and timing. Sometimes the classes are mixed years, sometimes not."

On Mondays and Tuesdays would he be up at eight for nine o'clock classes: Transfiguration from 9-11am, 11-1pm Charms, and then lunch. Then 2-4pm was potions.

On Wednesdays: English 10-12pm, lunch, and maths from 1-2pm.

On Thursdays: Defense against the Dark Arts from 10-12pm, lunch, and then history.

Fridays had Defense again from 10-12, lunch, and maths from 1-2pm.

"That's a really good schedule!" commented Harry. "It seems easy enough to memorize."

"It usually is," agreed Anita. "This way, you know every Monday and Tuesday you have these classes at the same time; and Thursdays and Fridays only have an afternoon class difference. Now for your gym..."

Harry couldn't decide between the heavy-duty course geared toward bodybuilding and defense (Harry wanted to defend himself, and grow a bit bigger) and the dance course which looked interesting and fun. "Can I do both?"

Anita looked at the course times and sections, and nodded. "You can fit the gym course, section C, in on Wednesdays from 3-5pm, and the dance class, section E, on Fridays, 3-5pm."

"Great," said Harry, looking at Anita. He was smiling and hadn't felt that interested or eager for school to start in a long time.

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Anita came by Harry's room later that week, a serious look on her face. "We have a problem, Harry," she said.

Confused, and hoping that there wasn't some mistake like him not actually being a wizard (it was his greatest fear to be found non-magical and sent back to the Dursleys), Harry nodded to Anita, who sat down on the spare bed in the dorm room.

"What's the problem?" asked Harry, swallowing.

Anita sighed. "I didn't want to worry you earlier, but it seems that Albus Dumbledore is increasing up his critical letters to me, which now include you. Your choice of Wyckham over Hogwarts caused a bit of a stir in the Daily Prophet, considering both your parents went to Hogwarts. I think Dumbledore was hoping you'd follow in their footsteps."

Harry frowned. "I don't understand why I am a concern for Dumbledore."

"I didn't understand either, until I spoke to Flamel and Blake, and things became much clearer," sighed Anita. "You best make yourself comfortable."

Thus, Anita began to explain what she understood of Halloween 1981, and how it was per Dumbledore's orders that Harry be taken from the

wreckage, and sent to his Aunt and Uncle, despite that the will had not yet been read.

Afterward, Anita had learned that Dumbledore had the will read and ignored some key factors – which of, she didn't know and urged Harry to contact Wallace to find out. Flamel had told her that Dumbledore sent him a letter requesting that he remove his Philosopher's Stone from Gringotts, as it wasn't safe, and allow Dumbledore to host it at Hogwarts instead.

"Gringotts is the safest place in England!" countered Harry, very confused and slightly upset. "What's he playing at?"

"Oh, something, I'll gather," muttered Anita darkly. She then continued with what she learnt, as she found it all pertinent to Harry's being at Wyckham.

Flamel had caved in to Dumbledore's 10-letters-a-day request, but gave him a diluted Stone, while he kept the real one on himself all the time.

"Meaning, the real stone is here."

"Yes, Harry."

After seemingly winning that round, Dumbledore had begun to send Anita letters telling her how unsafe Wyckham was, and Hogwarts had many more protections where Harry would be safe.

"What? Safe how?" asked Harry, surprised. "Why would I need to be safe at Hogwarts? I'm not a possession!"

Anita nodded. "Exactly, so this is where I went to Blake."

Matthew Blake had explained about the Boy-Who-Lived image, and how some people believed that Voldemort wasn't dead; that he was just biding his time and gathering energy and forces. Blake then went on to explain that the only person Voldemort seemed to fear was Dumbledore, giving a plausible, albeit vague, reason to have Harry "safe" at Hogwarts.

“That’s stupid!” Harry shook his head. “Voldemort was a person once before, so he obviously went to school – he was probably British, meaning he went to Hogwarts. Not Wyckham, ergo: he wouldn’t know what defenses Wyckham has or how to get around it.”

Anita agreed. “Very true... so what game is Dumbledore playing at, exactly? He placed you with the Dursleys and I saw what your Hogwarts letter had written on it: ‘To Mr. Harry Potter, the Cupboard under the Stairs.’ How could he leave you there with those people?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t like the sound of this. I’ll write Wallace and see what he can dig up for me. I might have to go back to Diagon Alley before school begins. Would that be okay?”

Anita nodded, surprised. “Of course! Just let us know a date and I’m sure one or five of the professors would come with you. They like you very much, Harry, and we won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Thank you, Headmistress,” said Harry earnestly. “I appreciate that.” He looked down at his laced fingers and sighed. “He’s not going to stop until I go to Hogwarts, will he?”

Anita sighed as well. “More than likely not. Would you like me to redirect any letters from Albus Dumbledore to my office? It would keep you from worrying about it during school.”

“I’d appreciate it, thank you,” said Harry, smiling.

“No problem,” Anita smiled back.

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Harry’s birthday had come and gone; Neville had sent him something by owl, and Harry called Hermione to see how she was doing (he barely could say goodbye; she was reading ahead and wanted to tell him everything she learnt). Harry went to Diagon Alley after sending an urgent letter to Wallace, who seemed very upset at what Harry was revealing. However, he did make some headway and Harry was

allowed to enter his family vault before school began and gathered several notebooks and textbooks that his father and mother had before they died.

He was very interested to learn about these four characters: Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs... they seemed to be very interesting pranksters, and Harry wondered if they were nicknames for his father and friends.

Before the other students would arrive, Harry scoped out the residence floors and told Neville and Hermione where their rooms were and who they were rooming with (a Dean Thomas and Susan Bones respectively); Harry reasoned that telling his acquaintances ahead of time would be so that they wouldn't get lost later.

By the last week of August, Harry was a bundle of nerves: the students were arriving throughout that week.

The morning of August 28th, Harry had a leisurely brunch in the Café, one of his favourite places in the whole school, and then hid himself in the library on the second floor. After staying there and reading some fantasy fiction novels, he left the second floor doors near the West Wing and returned to his room in the East Wing.

He was quite surprised to see the amount of hustle and bustle going on.

Then again, he thought, the entirety of the third to fourth floors spans across the East and West Wings plus the Core; only the West Wing's second floor is dedicated to the professors and their offices, so it's unsurprising that it's very busy while everyone looks for their rooms.

Parents were carrying suitcases and pets; the pets were meowing, squawking or hissing. Students were giving tearful goodbyes as first years, or calling out hello's to magical and known friends.

Startled by the change from this morning to the afternoon, Harry slipped into his bedroom and was happily surprised to see Blaise Zabini and his parents were already there.

His mother was tall and graceful, with long, thick brown hair tumbling down her back. She was wearing traditional wizard's dress robes and unfolding Blaise's clothes into his drawers.

Mr. Zabini was a tall, tanned man with a huge smile on his face as he looked around the room. He wore a mix of wizard's robes and business attire.

Blaise was a tall, thin boy with curly brown hair like his mother, with light blue eyes and a tanned complexion. He was standing by the open window, ogling the massive grounds. It was him who turned, and saw Harry first.

"Hello!" he said, striding forward as Harry kicked off his trainers, "I'm Blaise Zabini."

Harry shook the boy's hand. "Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you."

Harry gave the boy credit: he was obviously a pureblood, and didn't goggle Harry and go, "are you really?" or ask about his scar as Harry was sure many were going to do. Harry had read all about himself in the library's Rise and Falls of Recent Dark Lords. Blaise was actually very polite.

"Mum, Dad, this is my roommate, Harry," said Blaise, leading the smaller, black-haired boy over. "Harry, my parents: Francesca and Paulo Zabini."

Harry quickly shook their hands and smiled. "It's nice to meet you. Do you need any help? I'm already settled in."

Mrs. Zabini smiled warmly. "That would be lovely, Harry. Do you know where to put the school uniform?"

Nodding, Harry took it and showed the sliding mirror panel that revealed a closet. He hung the uniform up and explained it to Mrs. Zabini, who admitted wizards used wardrobes and drawers, not built-in closets (especially ones hidden behind mirrors!).

Harry then explained a bit about the school that he learnt while on campus, and offered to show Blaise and his parents – if they wished – around.

“Brilliant!” accepted Blaise, his smile wide and blue eyes happy. “I wasn’t too sure if I was going to like the Academy, you know. Hogwarts was where my parents went and they enjoyed it, but I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to learn more advanced and different magic.”

Mrs. Zabini interjected herself into the conversation. “I was a Ravenclaw at Hogwarts; those are witches and wizards who enjoy learning. I was pushing for Blaise to come here.”

“There aren’t any houses at Wyckham Academy. They don’t even give detentions or use the idea of house points. You’re here to learn, that’s what Flamel explained to me.”

“Flamel?” asked Mr. Zabini. “As in, Nicholas Flamel, the Alchemist?”

Harry nodded. “He’s our potions professor. He teaches the higher grades some basic alchemy as well.”

Floored, Mr. and Mrs. Zabini gaped at Harry, before realizing it wasn’t too polite. “Well, who would’ve thought, hmm, Paulo?” asked Mrs. Zabini. “Nicholas Flamel! One of the wizard world’s greatest minds... is teaching!”

Mr. Zabini could still not wrap around his head that Nicholas Flamel was going to teach his eldest son potions.

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Blaise’s parents said goodbye around 3 in the afternoon, and with Harry’s help, they finished unpacking Blaise’s personal items only an hour afterward.

“Do you still want to look around?” asked Harry. “I did offer two friends I made earlier this summer the same offer, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” replied Blaise.

Together, the boys wandered down the still-crowded and busy hallway toward Hermione’s room, only four rooms down and across the hall.

Hermione’s door to the room was open, and the room was crowded: Hermione’s parents and Susan’s aunt plus the two girls were trying to get everything put away while having a conversation.

Harry knocked on the door, clearing his throat for good measure as well.

Hermione, nearest to the door, looked up and smiled. “Harry! Come in! I can’t believe we’re actually here – well, you’ve been here since mid-summer – but still! We’re at Wyckham Academy; I can’t wait for classes to start, can you?”

Harry smiled and shook his head. “I did my schedule earlier this summer and I actually am looking forward to classes.” Motioning to Blaise, who stepped forward, Harry said, “Hermione, this is my roommate, Blaise Zabini. Blaise, one of my friends: Hermione Granger.”

The two shook hands and the boys offered to help Hermione and Susan with their clothes and books. Shortly after helping the girls and being introduced to the Head of Law Enforcement Amelia Bones, Susan’s aunt, Harry, Blaise, Hermione and now Susan went off to find Neville and his roommate.

The adults all happily let their children go and headed home shortly afterward.

Neville was easy to find: he was only a few short doors down from Hermione and Susan’s, and his grandmother’s outrageous vulture hat stood above all the other heads in the hallway.

Augusta Longbottom was talking to Dean Thomas’s mother about Wyckham compared to Hogwarts. It seemed that Ms. Thomas wasn’t all too convinced about a magical school being good for her son.

Neville, on the other hand, was helping Dean with his personal items when the four preteens arrived.

“Hello Neville,” chorused Harry and Hermione. Blaise and Susan introduced themselves, although it was hardly necessary as all three purebloods had met before at society functions.

Neville introduced Dean to the group, and they decided it would be best to follow Harry to the Café for dinner.

Being the specialist on the school, Harry played tour guide and showed his friends various points of interest and pointed out any classrooms they passed before reaching the Café.

“Why is it called the Café?” asked Susan, a slightly chubby blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl who looked like a Cherub.

Harry shrugged. “I think it’s because it’s similar to a buffet-style restaurant. You pretty much go up and get whatever amount of food you want to eat at whatever time. It’s also open straight from six in the morning to eight at night.”

Entering, those who had yet to see the Café were in awe, while Harry directed them to a free 10-person table.

In groups of three they got up and gathered their dinner and drinks; once they all had their food did they begin to eat, with Harry answering their questions to the best of his ability.

“A lot of it is answered in the school rules and regulation guide,” replied Harry to Hermione’s questions. “It’s in your nightstand drawer.”

After they had sated their hunger, the group went to the Commons, and got to know each other.

Blaise, Susan and Neville already knew each other briefly: they attended the Ministry Christmas Ball annually since they were

toddlers. However, due to the wizard world's class distinctions, none had the chance to get to know each other more.

Harry, Hermione and Dean all grew up in a non-magical environment, and related to previous schooling, bullies, and being out of their element.

Blaise and Hermione seemed to have a real craving to be bookworms and learn all that they could; Neville and Harry both had Auror parents and the need for justice, vengeance and to not be weak; Dean and Susan were arts and crafts people, happier being in the background and using their creative talents. Both admitted to not being the best students.

Nearing ten, the group split up into their dorm pairs, vowing to meet for breakfast the next morning at nine. As Harry and Blaise entered their room (being the first to arrive at), said their goodnight's, kicked off their shoes, changed into their pajamas and got into bed, Harry realized that Wyckham Academy was the best place for him, with Privet Drive and Hogwarts a fleeting and distant memory.

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Betas: Geri, Gemma

Chapter Three

The rest of the students arrived at Wyckham a week after the first years, on the fourth of September. According to Neville, Hogwarts was apparently already in session.

Harry and his friends met every morning of their first week at nine for breakfast in the Café, and with school beginning, they agreed to meet earlier at eight so they could go to class together.

Harry and Blaise, being roommates, naturally got on fabulously but for more reasons than just being in close proximity all the time. Blaise had a sarcastic, wicked dry sense of humor and was almost obnoxiously smart, but had several flaws: he was quick to temper and hid his feelings behind a mask of an outgoing personality. Harry, being a quiet observer and much more interested in not being bullied or stared at for who he was in the wizard world enjoyed Blaise's complementary personality. The two had hit it off within the first twenty-four hours of meeting each other and Harry found himself spilling secrets and fears he had not told anyone.

Of course, Blaise reciprocated.

Blaise knew of a blood oath that stopped him from telling Harry's secrets or vice-versa without permission of the other person, and the two performed it. A bond was instantly created through their blood ritual.

Both boys, however, did not know at that time that blood rituals were frowned upon by the Ministry, and heavily fined those they caught doing rituals. Then again, both boys would later learn that Wyckham Academy taught what they wanted and how they wanted, Ministry be damned.

This was made known especially when they had Flamel as their potions professor. Flamel had them make a slightly complicated, but dead useful, potion in their second class (the first was to go over proper cleaning, cutting and storing techniques of potions). They made a potion that would nullify the tracking spells on their wands, when dipped in the potion.

If brewed incorrectly, nothing would change. However, the incentive to get the potion correct was the reward of doing untraceable magic before they could legally do this at seventeen, was too good to pass up. Needless to say, all students brewed their potions correctly. Flamel, however, stressed to students to not abuse their newfound magical freedom, and should they abuse it, the tracking device would be returned to the wand.

In Transfiguration, they were taught to turn useless boring pieces of everyday junk into buttons, glass for glasses, and needles. Their professor, Janice Klein, admitted that the stuff they were learning wasn't likely to help them later on in life, but was a good way to gauge their levels and get them used to the power behind transfiguring objects through repetition.

Charms was a blast as the students learned levitation spells and then went outside to play a game of progressive dodgeball, where the balls would be levitated towards a student. The students had to dodge or stop the ball from hitting them by using more force than the previous student to levitate it to another student. A healer was naturally on hand for any broken noses.

In English with Headmistress Hartz, they began reviewing the basics: noun, verb, conjunction, adjective, adverb, preposition, etc., before being told they had two weeks to read and take notes on Twelfth Night. In the meantime, new definitions would enter the class and once they all finished reading Shakespeare, Hartz would show them the movie adaptation as a reward.

Maths was a review as well, as most purebloods with wizard education didn't cover the same vast material as muggleborns did. Some found the review tricky, but a study group was quickly established by Blaise and Hermione as the leaders.

History proved to be entertaining, as their professor showed them a clip of Back to the Future III, and then proceeded to amuse the class with a true/false questionnaire of ancient wizard and non-magical civilizations.

Sergeant Donahue was a squib who retired from Her Majesty's army after fighting in two wars. He took on the job as drill sergeant for the gym class, and had his students go through a rigorous exercise of jumping jacks, push ups, crunches, sit ups, two laps around the football field, and leg, arm, and back stretches. He took careful notes on each of the students, and their weaknesses, before dismissing them half an hour early and said that next week they continue doing this until they were all performing their exercises effortlessly. Then they'd get into heavier, more advanced work.

Dance was interesting; only Harry, Hermione and Susan took it out of his friends (Harry spent gym with Blaise, Neville and Dean), so Harry and Hermione paired up while Susan joined Wayne Hopkins. Their instructors, Liam Flannery and Cassie Ambrose, were dance champions and muggles. They started their students with stretches (Harry was still slightly sore from his gym class, but he enjoyed the workout anyway), before telling them they'd start with the waltz. The dance class quickly learned a simple box step and was performing wonderfully by the end of the two hours to Beethoven.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was exciting: their professor Kingsley Shacklebolt was a young Auror who quit the force when the teaching position was open (something about it being closer to home, more pay, less dangerous, and much more interesting than chasing wannabe Death Eaters). He started out by asking the class what they thought was considered light and then dark (good and evil, in other words), and the class had an interesting debate. Their second class consisted on learning a hex and its counterpart, and testing it on each other.

By the end of the first week, Harry was sore and tired but very happy. He and his friends completed their homework, and joined other students in the theatre for the Sean Connery James Bond film, Never Say Never Again.

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On Saturday, the schools' clubs and teams were being showcased in the indoor gym with booths and question periods set up all day. New students – and returning students, were encouraged to learn about

the schools' clubs and organizations, and join if they were interested. Harry, Blaise and Hermione went early in the morning, while Neville, Dean and Susan decided to sleep in (none were used to early weekend mornings), and meet for lunch at 12.

Harry and Blaise immediately moved to the Quidditch team booths. Harry had informed his friends that Wyckham Academy had seven intramural Quidditch teams: the Pirates, the Brainiacs, the Monsters, the Sirens (all girls), team Olympus and team Wyckham. The seventh team was the reserves: anyone on that team would join the game if a member of the original six intramural teams was unable to play.

Harry and Blaise's interest sparked the team captains, who invited the first years, after signing up, to join other hopefuls Sunday afternoon on the Quidditch field for tryouts.

Harry also ended up joining the dueling club. With much hesitation, Harry followed Blaise's urging to join the martial arts club as well.

Hermione joined the debate club, and had try-outs for the dance team, as well as a scheduled appointment to meet with the stable hand, Artur Vladimir, to see if she could ride a horse and partake in the equestrian team.

Blaise was happily copying Harry, signing up for Quidditch, dueling and martial arts, but also considered the tennis team.

At 12, the trio joined the other three in the Café, before going back to the gym to sign up their other friends.

Harry soon learned he was a pushover, and had Dean cajole him into trying out for the football team, especially after Headmistress Hartz walked by, and retold their conversation in the car when they first met, to Harry's friends about his running ability.

Dean also joined the art club and track team.

Susan happily joined others in the school band, blushing when she admitted to playing the violin. She wasn't all that interested in sports,

but joined the swim team on probation (not hers, the teams'. She wasn't too convinced about sports in general).

Neville joined a gardening club – blushing horribly but feeling quite confident when none of his friends made fun of him. Instead, they encouraged him if that was what he wanted, and Hermione even mentioned seeing the greenery in his room, to which Dean replied that Neville took excellent care of them.

Neville also joined Harry with the martial arts club.

When Harry wandered over to the business booth, hoping to meet Matthew Blake, he didn't mean to accidentally bump into to twin red-haired teens.

"Nothing to worry about, chap," said the first.

"It happens all the time, really," continued the second.

"So we forgive you, and would be quite honored if you accept and eat this candy we offer," grinned the first.

"As a token of our friendship," concluded the second.

Harry, seeing nothing wrong with it, took it and was about to stick it in his mouth when a young blond-haired man came up to him.

"I wouldn't eat it if I were you," he said, looking at the yellow chewy. "The Twins are pranksters, they love inventing their own gags."

"And the candy is one?" asked Harry, perplexed.

The twin redheads nodded. "Shouldn't have said anything, Matt," said the first.

"Really," agreed the second, "We would've had our first unsuspecting test subject."

The first peered at him. "Would you still be willing to eat it so we can see what needs to be improved?"

Harry tried not to smile. "Err... how about next week? I'd rather not get stuck as something that the nurse couldn't undo just after the first week of school."

The first nodded. "That sounds good. I'm Fred Weasley."

"George Weasley," the second introduced.

"And this is Matt," they chorused together.

Matt looked stern, but his twitching lips gave him away. Instead, he sighed, and turned to Harry. "Matthew Blake, business professor."

"Harry Potter," replied Harry. "Archibald Wallace is my accountant and he suggested I meet up with you, and take your course in my third year."

Blake brightened. "Really? Wallace, you say? How is he? I haven't seen him in years."

"Well, sir," answered Harry.

Blake nodded and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's good to hear." He glanced down at Harry, while the twins next to him watched out, in amusement. "Are you interested in business?"

Harry shrugged. "I really wouldn't know, I just learned about my family's status this summer. In any event, it would be good to learn if I want to take up my family's assets later in life."

"True," agreed Blake. He then jerked his thumbs at the Twins. "Take these two. They went for one year to Hogwarts, did wonderfully in charms and potions, and nearly flunked their other courses because they had their heads stuck firmly to the idea of creating their own joke shop that will put Zonko's out of business."

The twins tried to look innocent and offended. It didn't work.

Blake continued, "So what happened? They learn about Wyckham Academy and our business course, come rushing over here during their summer with their parents and are enrolled for their second year. They do ten times better than at Hogwarts, and due to their extracurricular activity, I agreed to monitor and help them with their goal. And now they're in their third year, already creating a multitude of products and learning the in's and out's of business."

"But you love us, Matt," said George.

"And you know that you're going to represent Weasley's Wizard Wheezes once our company is up and running," continued Fred.

Blake laughed. "Too true, and you're going to make millions and I'll get rich off of representing you through Blake Communications!"

Harry spoke up, "I may not know much about business, but if you ever need money to start your business, let me know. Being the 'Boy-Who-Lived' has to be good for something, right?"

Fred and George looked at Harry in awe – not because he was the Boy-Who-Lived – but because of the offer.

"Are you serious?" asked one.

"It's at least a thousand galleons to start," stated the other.

Harry shrugged. "Why not? It sounds like you're at the right school to learn the tricks, and you've got teachers who believe you can do it. Not to mention you both had this idea for some time now and know how to achieve it, broadly. I'm sure any money I donate won't be thrown down a sewer."

Harry, the Weasley twins, and Blake continued talking for a bit longer before Hermione found and dragged him away and that was how Harry became an official Weasley twin backer and business partner of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes.

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On Sunday, Blaise, Hermione, Neville, Dean and Susan joined Harry as they headed for the Quidditch pitch and football field. Harry's football try outs were that morning; afterward, they would go see Vladimir for Hermione's equestrian lesson and tryout, then lunch. After, the group would go back to the field for Quidditch tryouts and following that, would join Harry, Blaise, Dean and Neville run around for the dueling club and martial arts club.

Harry was going to be very, very sore.

The captain of the school's football team had Harry do stretches and laps before he began placing people. Harry was immediately set as a striker, due to his natural ability to run laps, and a mock-game ensued.

Harry was never moved for his position as a striker, and did very well with dribbling the football and even managed a few goals against the opposite teams' goalkeeper. He was, however, switched from one team to another, while other people were told they did not make the cut, or others joined in.

"How do you know so much about football?" asked Neville at one point during the match.

Dean replied, "I'm a West Ham fan."

"West Ham?"

"It's one of the league's teams," explained Dean, who then concentrated fully on the game.

Neville just rolled his eyes and shared a look with Blaise.

Dean was nearly in raptures by eleven o'clock, the end of the tryouts.

"He's on!" he was murmuring ecstatically.

"How can you tell?" asked Blaise, who had never seen football played before.

Dean wanted to swoon. “He was never moved from his position as a center forward, no matter what team he played, and was never sent off the field unless it was for a break or drink. They love him!”

Dean happened to be right; the captain, Oliver Wood (who also happened to be the Pirates Quidditch captain and keeper), told Harry that for the first year on the team he’d be a substitute, but would play in one or two games against other schools. Second year, Oliver stated, was when he’d be a regular player.

Happy, Harry joined his friends to go to the stables. Hermione spent an hour and a half petting a horse that seemed to enjoy her company (and the carrots she fed it). She groomed the horse, and was then permitted to the training circle, where she got the hang of it and Vladimir gave her permission to join the equestrian team, which he headed.

Lunch was a boisterous affair, as the other students in the Café were loudly talking about tryouts they witnessed and their friends’ achievements. A few words were spoken between sport rivals, but Harry and his friends later learned the boy and girl fighting were actually a couple and happily snogging later on that afternoon before the Quidditch tryouts.

Blaise and Harry were a bundle of nerves as they stepped up with the other hopeful students on the Quidditch field.

“All right you maggots!” shouted the Monsters captain, Adrian Pucey. He was a Hogwarts transfer student, and seemed to enjoy Wyckham’s atmosphere more than Hogwarts’. “Step up to a broom, say ‘up!’ and once you have it, split yourselves up according to what position you want to play! Chasers by the stands, beaters in the middle here in front of me, keepers by Wood, that Scottish bloke on my right, and the seekers can sit down behind the beaters.”

Harry wished Blaise good luck and moved over to the seekers. He figured if he wasn’t a seeker, he’d be a chaser, like Blaise.

The chasers went up first: Blaise was doing very well and managed to get down the field quickly and even scored a goal or two against

Oliver Wood. He only fumbled a pass once and quickly took the Quaffle back.

Twenty minutes later and breathing heavily, Blaise landed near Neville and Dean, and was told that he and thirty others were being considered, and had a good chance of being a chaser on a team.

The beaters went up next, and Harry took the time to watch Fred and George Weasley, the Twins he met earlier, perform aerial acrobatics with their clubs. They stopped all Bludgers that came their way and sent them at other hopefuls; being twins was certainly helping the two.

Another twenty were told to sit aside while those who didn't get in sulked slightly before cheering for other tryout people.

The keepers went next, making the seekers last. Once the keepers were done, the seekers were told to sit patiently while the team captains chose their picks.

The Pirates, lead by Oliver Wood, needed a seeker and two chasers. The Monsters needed a keeper and a chaser; the Sirens only needed a beater, while team Olympus, team Wyckham and the Brianiacs needed two chasers and a beater.

Blaise was picked to be a chaser for the Pirates, making Harry and his friends clap and cheer loudly. Blaise joined Oliver Wood, Fred and George Weasley, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet.

Once the other captains had picked their teammates, Adrian motion for the seekers to get ready.

Harry was feeling nervous: his stomach felt queasy and his palms were sweaty. Upon hearing a whistle blow, Harry urged his broom forward, heading nearly straight up to where he and other hopefuls were told they had to find a single golden Snitch while a mock game ensured. Meaning, there would be the beaters from all teams, the chasers from all teams, and a keeper for each hoop (those who didn't have a hoop, one team plus the reserve, were waiting on the ground and acting as referees).

Harry immediately zoomed off to one end of the pitch, high above the other players, watching the game below him with critical eyes. It was only after a few minutes that he saw a flash of gold hovering by Blaise's elbow – Harry gave a burst of speed, heading toward his best friend.

“Harry, what the—!”

Harry's hand reached out with a quick dart, and grabbed the snitch.

He grinned at Blaise, showing him the snitch. “What?” Harry asked innocently.

“You bloody...” Blaise let the insult trail, wagging his finger at him. “Argh!”

Harry was a shoo-in for seeker, and while the captains argued over him, Harry spoke up, saying he'd prefer playing on his best friends' team; and so, Harry joined the Pirates happily, while Oliver Wood looked as though he wanted to kiss him.

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Life at Wyckham Academy was fulfilling and eventful; intramural Quidditch games took place biweekly, year 'round, and practice was from Mondays to Wednesdays from seven to nine at night.

Harry was fast becoming interested in football; Oliver Wood told him he far exceeded any of the players but lacked the game knowledge and drive to be placed on full-time; however, there had already been three articles written about him in the Brighton Times about his stellar style and winning football games. He had practice from Thursday to Friday, every evening from seven to nine, and Wyckham Academy already had two seasonal games against other private schools in the area.

Life with Harry's friends was proving to be difficult to adjust to for a normally quiet and lonely boy, but things were improving rapidly. Blaise would refuse to have Harry spend time alone, unless it was with Hermione who enjoyed reading fiction as much as he did; Blaise

was his study partner the majority of the time, and he, Neville and Dean spent the rest of the time talking sports and school, while Susan and Hermione gossiped (which they hardly ever did, both loathed empty-headed prattle).

All his friends had strengths and superior qualities that Harry admired and wished he had himself (albeit, he didn't realize he had all those wonderful qualities and more). His friends complimented him just like he complimented them.

By the second week of school, Harry was used to Owl Mail. It was during that week, however, that some troubling news hit the school.

"I don't believe it!" said Susan, her eyebrows hidden beneath her fringe.

"Believe what?" asked Neville, leaning over her shoulder to read the Daily Prophet. The six preteens were sitting at a large 10-person table that Harry claimed as his.

"Gringotts was broken into!"

"What?" asked a shocked Blaise, "That's impossible; they have the best security features in the world!"

Harry kept silent. If he was right...

"Listen: it says on the morning of July 31st, someone attempted to break into one of their high security vaults, but it had been emptied earlier that day." Susan took a deep breath. "Though they're not releasing any details about whose vault it is, the goblins are saying only a dark wizard or someone skilled in dark magic would be able to make it that far."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Harry... you're quiet."

Blushing, Harry stammered, "Am not!"

"Are too," laughed Blaise. "So, are you going to share with us what you know?"

Sighing, Harry nodded. "Hartz told me that Dumbledore wanted Flamel to move his Philosopher's Stone to Hogwarts because it'll be better protected there than at Gringotts."

Jaws dropped; Dean whispered, "Are you telling me, that whoever broke into Gringotts was probably looking for the Philosopher's Stone?"

"Most likely," agreed Harry. He began to fiddle with his knife. "The thing is, Flamel gave in and gave it to Dumbledore."

"What?"

"Well, don't be all surprised, you know how Dumbledore gets when he doesn't get his way, he keeps sending me letters all the time telling me to go to Hogwarts!"

Hermione pressed, "So?"

"So," mimicked Harry, "Dumbledore got a Stone – only it's not the real one, the real one is here with Flamel."

The group breathed a sigh in relief.

Harry then continued: "The only thing we can do now is watch out for any suspicious behavior. But, considering Dumbledore made such a big hoo-ha about the Stone, I believe that whoever wanted it will now be at Hogwarts."

Susan bit her lip while the boys looked contemplative. Hermione tapped her finger to her lips. "There's nothing we can really do then."

Harry shook his head. "Not at the moment."

The others agreed.

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Hartz kept her word and let Harry know any developments with Albus Dumbledore, who was rumored to be planning an unscheduled and unwelcome trip to Wyckham Academy with a few of his professors.

That trip occurred on a dreary December morning, a few days before Wyckham let out of the December holidays.

Harry and his friends were sitting at what was widely known as “the Potter table,” or “the Marauders.” Harry had adopted his father’s and friends’ group as his; after all, he and his friends were trouble-makers of a sort, and were the brightest, cleverest, most creative of the school.

Harry had extended an invitation to the Weasley Twins to join them, which they did, and admired Harry profusely when they learnt of his father’s history – they seemed to be large Marauder fans. They had mentioned something about a map that showed everyone on Hogwarts’ grounds, but Harry was chalking that up to a prank or hype.

The majority of the school was in attendance that morning, as it was a Tuesday and morning classes had already begun for the upper-year students who needed two hours of lab time.

Albus Dumbledore strode through the open French doors of the Café, causing the volume to drop dramatically and the teachers to stop eating or grading. As one, the student body watched Dumbledore, a tall, pale man with lank black hair, and a small, wizened man approach the teacher’s round table and ask for directions, it seemed.

Hartz was turning red in her cheeks. Her brow was in a “V” and her voice was low. Flamel and Blake had also stood, while the other teachers glared on; none liked Albus Dumbledore much.

Finally, not seeking an answer, Dumbledore cut Hartz by showing his shoulder; the Purebloods at the school gave a gasp in shock: a cut direct, as sometimes known in the 18th century community, was known as the worst insult to be given to someone you thought inferior to their class rank.

Flamel was turning red as well, while Blake was frantically searching heads and looking for a student in specific: Harry Potter. By the time their eyes met, Dumbledore too had noticed the preteen and was striding toward him. The Headmistress and two professors were following quickly afterward.

“Harry, my boy!” the jovial sounding Dumbledore began, his blue eyes twinkling. “How are you?”

“I’ve been better,” remarked Harry coolly. He wasn’t a fan of Dumbledore himself.

The black-haired man sneered at the boy and said in what he obviously thought to be a long-suffering voice, “See, Headmaster, I did warn you that Potter was going to be as arrogant and proud as his father was!”

Blaise, Neville and Susan as reeled in shock; Severus Snape, Hogwarts’ Potions Professor, had just indirectly slandered the Potter name, and Harry knew it.

The boy’s back had grown stiff, while Hermione placed a warning hand on his shoulder before removing it. Susan had discreetly charmed her quill to write down what everyone was saying. Everyone at the table knew having a written record of what was being said could prove useful later.

Hartz, Flamel and Blake skidded to a halt when they heard Snape’s silky tones.

In a blisteringly cool voice, Hartz said, “Indeed, Snape – you must be a great man of psychoanalytical skill to have deduced Mr. Potter’s character by one sentence alone!”

Students in the Café tittered in amusement. They knew of their Headmistress’s biting wit, and were glad to see someone cut down with it.

The man in question snarled at Hartz, looked her up and down, and obviously found her lacking. "I hardly see a reason to explain myself to you, muggle."

"Snape!" snapped Flamel, frowning deeply. "Apologize!"

The man moodily crossed his arms and refused, turning to Dumbledore who watched with a shrewd eye.

Instead, Dumbledore ignored the byplay, and turned back to Harry. "Well, Harry—"

"It's Mr. Potter," interjected Harry swiftly, standing. As one, his friends at the Marauder table stood as well. Blaise offered silent support, stepping near his best friend; he was just slightly behind, on his right hand side.

Dumbledore gave a force smile. "Now, Harry..."

"Sir, I must urge, please – it is Mr. Potter," snapped Harry through gritted teeth. The smaller man with the two gave a squeak of alarm and looked back and forth quickly.

Before Dumbledore could continue, Harry barged ahead: "And if you are here to convince me that Wyckham Academy is unsafe and unsuitable for me, please don't." Harry unfolded his arms and let them dangle at his side, although his fists were tightly clenched together.

"You are here to convince me to transfer to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, which I turned down earlier in the year due to the school's lack of courses and extracurricular activities." Harry raised a single eyebrow, looking the every bit of a young Duke. "Am I correct?"

Dumbledore flushed an unbecoming pink under his half-moon spectacles, and muttered, "Really, Mr. Potter, this doesn't need to be done in front of your classmates and professors, it is a private affair."

“Hardly,” drawled Blaise, stepping forward. “How is it private, Headmaster Dumbledore? And why should Harry trust you in private when you’ve seemed to neglect his express wishes to leave him alone and accept his choice?”

Dumbledore’s thoughtful gaze turned to Blaise Zabini, who did not flinch or look away. “Mister... Zabini, is it?” He hummed, turning back to Harry. “Harry, I do not think that having the company of a Pureblood family such as a Zabini’s is a good idea, as they are linked to numerous dark activities in England and Italy.”

“How dare you!” thundered Nicholas Flamel. “Albus Dumbledore, stand down! As your mentor and as someone who is close to calling you an ex-friend, stand down from your glorified, egotistical position and apologize!”

Dumbledore glanced at the man who taught him the twelve uses of Dragon’s Blood, who tutored him personally in transfiguration and potions, and gave him his spot as Leader of the Light Side. The man was powerful and of an old family, and placating him would always be a good idea.

“I offer my apologies, Mr. Zabini.” Dumbledore gave a short bow in Pureblood custom, before turning to his professors and murmuring delicately, “perhaps it is time we leave.”

“Yes, please do,” muttered Hartz, but loud enough, “And do not come back here, especially unannounced.”

Blaise was shaking and pale when Dumbledore left, Harry a trembling mass of anger and nerves. Blaise stood up against the most powerful man in the entire wizard UK, and Harry did the same – although he was a much more personal case for the old wizard.

“Are you two alright?” asked Hermione urgently, her face worried and pinched. Hartz echoed the sentiment and asked the two to meet her in her office. Professor Klein waved the two boys’ off from her seat at the main table, easily read as they were allowed to skip transfiguration without repercussions.

Thirty minutes later, Harry and Blaise sat in Hartz's office.

"I've informed your parents, Blaise," Hartz said softly. "Susan gave me a copy of the dialogue that occurred, and I think we can get a formal apology from Dumbledore, should your family want it."

"Thank you," muttered Blaise, still pale. Hartz peered worriedly at him.

"Really, Blaise, drink some juice," she urged. "I'm half-afraid you're going to faint on me!"

"I'm okay," the young boy said, some colour coming back into his face. Harry, on the other hand, was steaming and two bright spots of red were on his cheeks.

"Who does that man think he is?" Harry finally ranted, shaking. Hartz watched calmly as Harry breathed in and out deeply, controlling his emotions.

"Feeling better?" she asked. Harry and Blaise both nodded, taking a can of Coca-Cola from the Professor's offering hands. "You both look like you need some sugar in your system."

Harry murmured a quiet "thank you," while Blaise sighed.

"Will you two be all right, going back to class? Or would you like the day off?" No one could accuse Anita Hartz of being a bad teacher or Headmistress – when one of her students was hurt or upset, she took care of them.

Blaise and Harry looked at each other before Harry spoke: "I think it would be better if we didn't go to class today, if that is all right."

"That's fine, Harry. I'll inform your teachers."

"Thank you."

Both boys left the office, speaking in low, hushed tones. Anita Hartz almost felt sorry for Dumbledore.

Almost. But not really...

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TBC...

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Chapter Four

Blaise received a letter from his mother through his eagle, Marius. She complimented him on standing up to Dumbledore and handling himself well; she also mentioned that they would want a formal, public-issued apology for Dumbledore's words and then switched topics, asking if Harry would like to join the family at their Italian villa in Tuscany for Christmas.

Harry agreed on the spot.

No incidents occurred between Dumbledore's visit and the first day of the Christmas holidays. Magical students who had homes connected with the Floo left first in the early morning; portkeys were issued and handed out early morning as well, allowing a large group of students to go home earlier than those who needed Floo.

Halfbloods and muggleborns had parents pick them up or had a shuttle bus drop them off at the nearest train station, where they would arrive at King's Cross mid-afternoon.

The rest of the students were staying over the break.

Hermione and Dean traveled home together by car, with Dean being only an extra half-hour out of the Granger's way in London. Neville and Susan took portkeys earlier and Blaise and Harry were waiting for the Floo.

Although Blaise had told Harry what Floo was, and how to use it, he was still a little apprehensive of stepping into a fireplace. But, seeing how the other students were at ease and watching their practiced words and tight grip on their luggage, Harry thought he could master it well.

"Remember the address?" asked Blaise.

Harry nodded. "Bramasole. I remember. Say it loud and clear, and hold on tight."

Blaise slapped Harry on the back. "Exactly!"

“Why do I suddenly feel as though this is a bad idea?” muttered Harry.

Blaise quipped, “Probably because it is!”

The room Harry Floo'd into was painted in a soft, orangey-yellow, pleasing to the eye with open windows carrying a warm breeze. Although barren, the Italian countryside was still greener than southern England's light dusting of snow. Harry, unfortunately, took this all in from his position on the floor.

Francesca Zabini was sitting on a love seat facing the large fireplace when the two young boys were spat out. Blaise landed with poise and elegance that spoke of practice and experience with the Floo, while Harry lost his footing and was a dust ball on the floor.

Laughing, the woman exclaimed, “Now, really, Harry – I may be a pureblood but there is no need for you to bow to me! Besides, you're a Duke – and Paulo is barely a Lord!”

Brushing himself off, Harry stood and flashed a smile to Blaise's mum. “I couldn't help it, Mrs. Zabini; I always fall to my knees in the presence of such beauty.”

“Oh, shut it you,” scoffed Blaise, “that was a lame quip!”

Francesca blushed prettily and waved a hand dismissively. “Now, Harry – please, ‘Mrs.’ makes me feel old. I'm Francesca, not Mrs. Zabini!”

Harry took note of the open air and friendliness that she exuded, and nodded. “Of course, Francesca, I will remember that.”

“Now, Blaise,” began the older woman, “Why don't you show Harry his room for the break? Then we should have him meet your brother and sister.”

Blaise nodded and began winding his way through open rooms – lounges with gauzy drapes and bookshelves and a piano in one – rooms with large windows and cushions.

“This is huge,” commented Harry. His head was swiveling back and forth to take in everything. He almost walked into a statue of a man’s chest.

Blaise laughed. “From the outside though, it’s really small. Out great-grandfather was a charms expert and he enlarged the whole inside. Most magical dwellings are like this, unless you’re of very old money.”

“Your mother said you have a younger brother?” Harry asked, changing topics. He sighed then, quietly and almost wistfully, “I wish I had a younger sibling.”

Blaise glanced at Harry, a few steps behind him, and offered a tight smile. “You might say that now, Harry, but if you actually had one, you might go spare!”

“I know,” agreed the preteen, “It’s just... it would’ve been nice to have my parents live all that longer to have another child.”

“Everyone misses them,” shared the Italian. “No where near what you feel, of course, but most Light families felt their death in some way or another.”

Harry nodded, and Blaise stopped. “My room is right next to this one – it’s our guest room, so it’ll be yours during the summer break.”

“Thanks!” Harry exclaimed, stepping in and stopping. “Blaise... are, are you sure that this is to be my room?”

Blaise looked at Harry under a wilting glare. “Yes.”

He knew exactly what Harry was thinking: it was completely different than what he was used to, spending ten years of his life under the stairs. The room he was given to stay in was probably the whole size of the main floor at Privet Drive.

In fact, it was. The room had a fireplace, with a couch and two armchairs around it, with glass-covered tabletops and side-tables scattered around the room with richly coloured table runners and covers thrown over them. A bed was pushed up far against one wall, with two floor-to-ceiling windows next to the bed. The bed was covered with silk covers, silk pillowcases and what a bunch of pillows there were! The grape-coloured drapes were so long they pooled on the floor, but not a speck of dust was anywhere to be seen.

A large wardrobe in light wood was next to a smaller chest of drawers for smaller personal items, and through what Blaise explained to be a connecting door, was the bathroom he would share with his best friend.

"This is fantastic, thank you so much!" expecting Blaise to reply, Harry jumped, startled, when it was a deep, masculine and accented voice.

"It's not a problem, Harry."

Paulo Zabini was leaning with his arms crossed against the doorframe. "I'm very glad that you joined us this holiday break. Are you sure you did not want to go back to Surrey with your Aunt and family?"

Harry shook his head and missed the scowl Blaise wore. Paulo raised his eyebrows. "They don't care much for me, Mr. Zabini."

"Please, if you're calling Francesca by her name, you'll call me Paulo," the man smiled. "And why would they not care for you?"

"How about the fact alone that his room is the cupboard under the stairs, meant for shoes?" snarled Blaise. Harry looked at his shoes.

Paulo looked flabbergasted. "They... they would do that to their own family?"

When Harry nodded, Paulo immediately changed his attitude and Harry quickly learned about Italian families: they take care of their

own. It turned out Harry became one of those 'own' as well in that matter of twenty minutes.

And Harry, with a large smile on his face, spent the afternoon with Blaise, meeting the Zabini family and couldn't remember a time when he was happier.

The days leading up to Christmas were a blur; Harry could barely remember anything. There was so much to do and prepare – Blaise and his younger brother Mario were roped into making sure all their relatives had a room and their bags were put away (and that included the extra house elves they brought with them). Blaise then had to help Mario entertain their much younger cousins.

Francesca learned Harry was fairly accomplished in the kitchen and roped him into helping her prepare the meals everyday with the house elves. Harry learned that it wasn't as hard work when he was with the Dursleys, but Harry was finding that learning a new Italian dish every night was straining his brain; he didn't complain though, he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Paulo and the other older men – including Blaise's elder twenty-something cousin Marcello Dimelio, a dragon-tamer from Romania – spent their time speaking in Italian, about politics, England, business, money, women, and Quidditch. It was Marcello, though, that Harry ended up speaking to in great lengths during dinner. He had a muggle girlfriend who worked in England's documents sector, sending birth certificates to those who lost, or death certificates, passports, and other documents.

Through Marcello, he was sure he could get Harry a passport and copies of his mother's family records.

At one point, the Zabini family paused in their Christmas celebrations to wish a cousins' wife and family – three times removes from Paulo Zabini – a very happy Chanukah, and that evening the children playing with Dreidels.

The day before Christmas Eve, Francesca came into Blaise's room, where he and Harry were playing Gobstones.

"Harry," began Francesca, "Paulo just received an invitation to the Ministry Ball tomorrow night at Cornelius Fudge's residence. The invitation was for immediate family plus two guests. I was wondering if you'd like to come along?"

Harry, surprised, stammered out, "But I've nothing to wear!"

Francesca laughed. "That can be easily fixed. It'll be dress robes, but you can get them tailored so that they are very similar to muggle formal wear."

Harry thought. "I'd love to come; I'd have to go out tomorrow though and get dress robes..."

"No, you won't!" inserted Blaise. "I've got a spare from last year that I outgrew. It'll fit you perfectly though, you're nearly three inches shorter than I am."

Harry smiled gratefully to Blaise. "Thank you!"

Harry was a bit nervous; this was the first time in ten years that the majority of the wizard worlds' elite would be seeing the Boy-Who-Lived, and some might have a problem with him being with the Zabinis.

However, Francesca and Paulo assured him that they wanted him with them, and if there were any problems, they'd leave immediately.

Feeling slightly uncomfortable in his dress robes – which he modified slightly and added his Wyckham tie to – Harry tugged at a jacket sleeve and rolled his shoulders.

Blaise, glancing at his best friend, rolled his eyes and said, "Honestly, Harry, it'll be fine. I'll stop any wayward females from jumping you or declaring their intentions to marry!"

“Blaise!” scolded Francesca, “Don’t scare the poor dear!”

The Zabini family plus Harry were already in the entry foyer of Fudge’s place of residence: gold marble floors and large white pillars leading down a wide, red carpeted staircase to an open ballroom. A string orchestra was in one corner, playing waltzes and ballroom dances. The windows to the room were floor-to-ceiling, spanning two storeys, and frost-tinted.

Upon entering the ballroom, Paulo spotted some business partners and ventured over to talk to them; Francesca ordered Blaise to remain with Harry, and then added for Mario to stay with them as well. The seven-year-old sighed, but inwardly found Harry’s company enjoyable and the three went off in search of Neville and Susan.

Neville was found standing forlornly next to his grandmother, who was, in a loud, booming voice, trying to tell an old, deaf wizard all about Wyckham Academy when he politely enquired after Neville’s education.

“Hullo Neville!” chorused the two preteens. Neville brightened considerably.

“Blaise! Harry!” he said. “I wasn’t expecting the two of you here!”

Augusta Longbottom paused in her dialogue with the deaf wizard and beadily looked at the three boys in front of her.

“Well,” she boomed, “I see that the Academy has been well for you two.” She narrowed her eyes and asked, “Introduce us, Neville.”

Neville rolled his eyes behind his Gran’s back as though to say she’s got a sort-term memory, eh?

“Gran, you remember Blaise Zabini,” Neville began, and waved a hand at the three. “This is his younger brother, Mario, and Harry Potter.”

It seemed as though the deaf wizard wasn't all that deaf, because at Harry's name he spun around from examining a potted plant.

"Mr. Potter!" he began, his wizards' hat toppling over sideways. He reached forward and shook Harry's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir, a pleasure!"

"Erm... likewise," stated Harry, glancing in horror at Blaise who shrugged.

"Why, no one knew what to think with you choosing the Wyckham Academy over Hogwarts! Quite the scandal, quite... but tell me, Mr. Potter – do you like it there?"

Harry could see Mrs. Longbottom puffing up – it seemed she was trying to help the Academy's name and it was only now when Harry was around that others were interested.

Harry decided to plug the school as best as he could. "It's brilliant sir," he said quite honestly. "My friends and I enjoy the courses and the environment. The professors are all intelligent and helpful."

"Really?" the wizard exclaimed. He seemed very surprised. "Even though the school is run by a Muggle?"

"Even though," inserted Blaise firmly. "We really must be going, right Harry? Mother and Father are waiting for us at the punch bowl." He gave a tiny bow to Mrs. Longbottom and asked, "May your grandson accompany us?"

Mrs. Longbottom glared at the elder wizard and nodded, shooing Neville away. The four raced across the hall, spotted Susan, and stopped to chat.

"Hello," the shy girl said. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Hello children." Amelia Bones offered, before turning back to a debate between three older gentlemen.

Their voices rose, but not to the point where people would turn to watch or murmur about; Harry wonder who they were and asked his friends.

“That pudgy one is Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic and the host,” began Susan, pointing to one discreetly. “The other man with him that looks a bit like a lion is Rufus Scrimgeour, the head of the Auror department. The tall blond man is Lucius Malfoy. His son, Draco, is around here somewhere – probably with his mother – and goes to Hogwarts.”

“Oh, and Harry,” added Neville softly, “Dumbledore is here with Minerva McGonagall, the Hogwarts’ transfiguration professor and head of Gryffindor. You’ll want to stay away from them... they’re over at the refreshment table, near the band.”

“Thanks, Neville,” Harry replied, letting out a sigh of relief for the warning.

As the group of five now mingled around the ballroom (staying away from the center where couples were performing the waltz), they soon came upon an open door. They ducked inside, happy to be away from the grown-ups, and found that they were not the only children to do so.

A large group sat on chairs, drinking hot chocolate. Girls giggled in groups, watching the adults dance and sigh when a particularly good-looking man waltzed by.

A slightly skinny, but regal looking blond was holding court at his end of the room, in front of the fireplace.

“Blaise!” the boy called. “How have you been? You’re at that Muggle-lovers’ school now, aren’t you?”

Blaise gave a nearly inaudible sigh, and moved forward. Mario and Harry went with him, while Susan and Neville happily joined a smaller group of preteens who went to Hogwarts near a window.

"Fine, Draco, and it's actually a very good school," began Blaise. He nodded to his brother. "You remember Mario, right?"

"Certainly," Draco Malfoy nodded at the younger boy, who flashed a quick smile before glancing away at staring at a portrait over the fireplace. "But," continued Draco, "who is your new friend?"

Blaise tensed slightly, but Harry anticipated this and spoke quietly, "Harry Potter."

Draco's mouth dropped open slightly; all noise around the room stopped. Everyone was staring at Harry.

Regaining his attitude, Draco stuck out a hand. "Draco Malfoy," he flashed a smile of perfectly even white teeth.

Harry shook the hand warily, but murmured something similar to "charmed."

"I haven't seen you around Hogwarts, so you must also go to the Academy," began Draco, offering the two a seat on a couch. When Harry glanced at the two larger boys on the seats across from them, Draco said simply, "Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe."

"Yes," said Harry slowly. "I'm at Wyckham Academy with Blaise. We're roommates."

Draco laughed shortly. "Then you're surrounded by mudbloods and pathetic Muggle-lovers. Well, at least you're not at Hogwarts, Harry. I don't know how Dumbledore allows some people entry at that school, my father says it's a disgrace."

"Why?" asked Harry, noticing Blaise had fallen silent.

Draco looked surprised. "Why, because of those who attend. There are people like the Weasleys, blood traitors. Surely you know this?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "I was raised in a non-magical family. I didn't even know I was a wizard until I received my Wyckham

acceptance letter, and then Hogwarts'. I find that I'm learning something new every day that I ought to have known from birth."

"Harry Potter, living with muggles?" snarled Draco. "Another disgrace! Who could do such a thing?"

"Dumbledore," muttered Blaise under his breath. Harry had told him about Dumbledore's involvement in his finances and how he left him, in a basket outside the Dursley residence.

Draco looked horrified.

"Harry, Blaise," came a new voice. The two looked up to see Neville standing near the couch's armrest apologetically. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering if you wanted to meet with a few others who attend Hogwarts?"

Draco noticed Neville, but didn't say anything: he seemed in shock over what he learned... or cunningly realized that Harry and Blaise had befriended Neville and that it was prudent to stay on their good side.

"If you'll excuse us Draco," began Blaise softly, "we'll catch up with you a bit later in the evening."

"Of course," the blond stammered.

As they walked away, toward Susan and Neville's group of friends, Harry murmured to Blaise, "Is Draco always like that? Condescending and prejudice?"

Blaise shrugged. "His father is even worse, and when you're constantly surrounded by it, you grow up believing it as well."

Neville and Susan introduced Harry and Blaise (and Mario) to the Patil twins Parvati and Padma (Gryffindor and Ravenclaw respectively), Hannah Abbott the Hufflepuff, and Terry Boot (Ravenclaw).

“Do you always add your house affiliation after introducing who you are?” asked Harry, amused.

Terry looked affronted. “Of course, our house defines us!”

Blaise looked amused. “That’s rather sad, Boot. You need a house – one that has strong definitions of who should belong to one house or another – to tell you who you are.”

Neville spoke up. “I suppose people would say that if someone is a top student, they ought to be in Ravenclaw because they are smart, rather than Slytherin; even though they may be cunning.”

Harry remembered when he first met Blaise; his mother had said something about being a Ravenclaw while at Hogwarts...

Draco Malfoy injected himself into the conversation, having walked over with Crabbe and Goyle mid-way through Blaise’s point. “Depending on families, as well, people can end up in a certain house or not. Like the Weasleys: they’re all Gryffindor, the Malfoy family is Slytherin.”

“I’m glad that we don’t have houses at Wyckham,” stated Susan loudly. “There are no ingrained traits or prejudices between houses when we arrive; we get along with everyone in our year!”

“Are you saying that we don’t?” asked Parvati hotly. “That we don’t get along with everyone in our year at Hogwarts?”

Blaise snorted and Harry looked ready to burst out laughing – he was turning red around his cheeks and neck.

“Of course you don’t get along with everyone,” said Neville quietly. He turned to Malfoy. “Do you like everyone at Hogwarts in your year, Malfoy?”

Draco looked startled at being spoken to by Neville. He plastered a half-hearted sneer on his face – looking eerily like his father – and scoffed, “No! Especially that blood traitor, Weasley.”

“I know two Weasleys at Wyckham: Fred and George. Do they have siblings at Hogwarts?” asked Harry.

Padma nodded. “Two in Gryffindor: Ron, who Malfoy is talking about, and his older brother Percy, who is a fifth year and prefect.”

“Prefects,” shuddered Blaise. “Can you imagine prefects at Wyckham?”

Harry shuddered alongside his friend. “No more midnight snack raids in the kitchen – no more sneaking into the library at two in the morning – no more late night hide and seek games in the dormitories with the other years...”

“No more late night potions experiments gone wrong?” inputted Susan wryly. “We all heard about the two of you sneaking into Flamel’s lab and blowing up a cauldron.”

“That wasn’t us,” answered Blaise and Harry together, looking innocent. “Honest!” added Blaise.

Draco snorted and Terry and Padma looked at the two funnily. “Say,” began Terry, “Just who are you two? Neville never got around to introducing you.”

Blaise smirked while Harry smiled. “Blaise Zabini and Harry Potter,” said Harry kindly, still quiet and soft. He wasn’t used to too many people yet.

Hannah’s jaw dropped, Padma and Terry looked on in surprise and Parvati began assessing the two with a gleam in her eyes.

Mario chose that time to speak up, pausing talk of Hogwarts houses and prejudice. “It’s nearly eleven, Blaise, Harry. We ought to go find Mama and Papa now.”

Blaise nodded, agreeing, and Harry murmured a quiet goodbye. Neville and Susan called out that they’d see them once school started again, and Draco waylaid the three before they left the room, saying that he’d walk out with them.

As they left, they could hear Padma and Terry make parting comments.

"I can't believe those two! I wonder if all Wyckham Academy students are as rube and obnoxious as they are!"

"I like having a house define me!"

Harry snickered.

Blaise, Mario and Harry found Paulo and Francesca Zabini talking to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy near a chocolate fountain. Harry could easily tell where Draco got his looks from: he looked more like his mother (the narrow cheeks and nose and lean body) but had the attitude of his father.

When they clustered around the adults, Draco made the introductions (or reintroductions), causing Narcissa and Lucius to raise their eyebrows at Harry's joining of the Zabini family.

"Harry Potter," began Lucius in a cool, low tone. "I am surprised to learn that you are enjoying Wyckham Academy. You ought to be at Hogwarts, in Gryffindor like your parents."

"So I've been told," started Harry, a little cold himself. At Francesca's pointed look, Harry continued with a little warmer tone. "I find though, that I am not my parents. I don't know how they acted or what they enjoyed, so I find it difficult to say that I ought to be somewhere just because they were there."

"Continue talking like that Harry and you might've ended up in Slytherin with me!" laughed Draco.

"Dumbledore would've thrown a fit," chuckled Blaise.

Harry agreed, "I bet he'd have figured out a way to get me in the house he wanted me to be in."

The three preteens had a chuckle over that thought; Mario yawned and began to snuggle against his mothers' side and Paulo soon announced after some more small talk that he ought to get his family home.

The Malfoy's said goodnight and soon Harry was in his room at the Zabini's Italian residence, readying himself for bed.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" asked Blaise, already in his pajamas. He was leaning against Harry's wardrobe.

"Yes."

"What did you think of the Hogwarts students we met?"

Harry frowned, removing his pajama shirt and pants from the dresser. "Some were rather pretentious. Malfoy was in his own way, trying to stay on our good side although he was vocal in his opinions. Terry Boot and Padma Patil were elitists, happy to be in Ravenclaw because it showed they were smart and special... Hannah and Parvati seemed all right though."

"Until Parvati started ogling you, after learning who you were," laughed Blaise, brushing a hand through his black curls.

Harry grimaced. "Please don't ever bring that up again. I think I would go insane if Susan or Hermione started acted that way. Or, rather, if anyone did. I'm not interested in girls – yet – and I would rather they stay away from me."

Blaise laughed harder. "They'll start coming after you soon, you know. As soon as we get a bit older."

Harry unfolded the shirt and unbuttoned it. "I'll send them your way then."

"Thanks," grinned Blaise.

Harry looked over at his best friend and smiled. "You're crazy, Zabini."

"That's what they all say... just don't come crying to me when I've got all the girls drooling after me and you're left alone!"

Harry threw a pillow at his friend in response, muttering about crazy Italians under his breath as Blaise laughed his way out of the room.

Christmas Eve was spent decorating the tree and the house. The children with wands were allowed to help with the decorating, using household charms to string up lights, tinfoil, and other bobbles, as the location was unplottable. Harry and Blaise kept quiet about the fact that they didn't have a Ministry regulated wand tracer anymore.

The afternoon after decorating with quiet, eating gingerbread cookies, drinking milk or coffee (Blaise had coffee) and teasing the smaller children with stories about Santa Claus.

Everyone went to bed near ten, yawning and tired out from the excitement. The only thing Harry found missing was the snow: the snowball fights, the snowmen, the snow angels... that would make the Christmas perfect. However, Harry wasn't going to get upset over it, as it was the first time he ever felt included in a family or Christmas celebration.

The Dursleys usually locked him in his cupboard.

In the early morning of Christmas Day, when the sun was barely peaking out from the horizon, Harry was woken by Blaise jumping on his bed and telling him to wakeup, there was a bunch of Christmas presents to go through.

The two raced to the kitchen without changing their clothes, eager to eat breakfast and begin unwrapping.

The entire family was gathered in the large living room and presents were divided (Harry was shocked by the large pile he received; he

counted near fifteen gifts for him alone!). Eagerly, the children began to unwrap and rip and pull. The adults took their time.

Harry received a defense book titled *So You Wanna Be an Auror* from Hermione; a Remembrall from Neville; a snow globe that had a miniature of Hogwarts in it from Susan; Blaise gave him Pirates Quidditch team poster (surprisingly, Harry gave one to Blaise as well... they were playing on the same Quidditch team at Wyckham. Dean had also said the gaudily dressed pirate on the poster looked similar to the rum brand Captain Morgan, which amused Harry to no end). Harry also received a black scarf, Italian recipe cookbook, and a framed wizard photograph of Blaise and Harry from the Minister's Ball in their fine wear from the Zabini parents. Fred and George Weasley sent along a package of Zonko's joke shops finest and the Dursley's sent a single pence.

What surprised Harry was a package wrapped in plain brown parcel wrap, with no card or tag. Unwrapping the coarse rope that held it together, the packaging fell apart to reveal a shiny, sheer white fabric. Unfolding it, Harry held it up and looked at it confusedly.

"That looks like an invisibility cloak," commented Marcello from the couch. He was munching on a chocolate frog.

"A what?" asked Harry.

"Invisibility cloak," repeated Mario, sounding important. "When you wear it, you'll disappear and no one will be able to see you."

"Try it!" urged Paulo eagerly. Francesca shot him a look.

Harry stood, the wrapping paper around him crinkling. Swirling the cloak around until he found the back – including a tag on it that he would look at closer later – Harry drew the cloak around him, leaving the hood off.

"Well, it's an invisibility cloak," called out Blaise's grandmother, Nona Zabini. "We can't see your feet, Harry dear."

Harry would've had a minor heart attack had the Zabini family not explained to him what an invisibility cloak did beforehand. It was quite disconcerting not seeing a body where it ought to be.

"Was there a card?" asked Francesca, frowning.

"No," said Harry, removing the cloak. A sigh fell around the men of the room. Oh, the uses! Harry paused in folding it, looking closer at the tag. "It was my dad's."

The room fell silent.

Harry looked up, the tag held between his thumb and forefinger. "The tag has 'Property of James Potter' stitched onto it."

Harry sat down heavily and Blaise looked at the tag for himself. He whistled lowly, glancing at his friend. "Are you all right, Harry?"

"Yeah, I will be," the preteen replied, giving Blaise a wobbly smile. Francesca took that moment to stand and ask, "Coffee anyone?"

Blaise and Harry sat together on the floor of the Zabini living room long after the rest of the family joined Francesca in the kitchen for coffee.

Harry and Blaise rang in 1992 together, spending the earlier part of the evening with the Zabini family and then sneaking off to an unused building on the Zabini property near the vineyard. It was a storage room, hosting a few cracked leather saddles, gardening tools and wooden benches, but the two preteens made it their own for the night. With much cajoling to the house elves, they snuck out with sandwiches and a bottle of champagne.

Paulo Zabini found the two the next morning snoring loudly, their champagne bottle empty. Waking them up and offering a potion for their headaches, he gave the two a stern lecture on abusing alcohol, and then promptly told them if they wanted to drink all they had to do was ask and it would be allowed if they were surrounded by adults.

Properly ashamed, Harry and Blaise agreed; only to gape then in surprise when Paulo then asked if they enjoyed themselves and told them to go back to their rooms to sleep in.

They returned to Wyckham on January 4th, their trunks heavy and clattering loudly when the portkey deposited them on the gravel driveway. Luckily, no cars were arriving or else they'd have had to swerve to avoid an accident.

Only Hermione had arrived back early that morning, hours before Blaise and Harry; her parents had to go to work early for a few emergency root canals.

Hermione helped the two boys in getting their trunks to their room (two locomotor trunks) and helped them unpack their new gifts. Harry and Blaise thanked Hermione for their books (Blaise received one titled 1001 Obscure Spells), while she expressed her joy at their combined efforts to give her a book collection: the entire Transfiguration Made Easy volumes one through five.

Blaise and Harry began to tell Hermione about the Minister's ball when Anita Hartz came by, asking how their vacation was and giving the three of them gifts.

"Do you do this for everyone?" asked Harry in surprise.

"I try to," admitted Hartz. "Flamel and Blake helped cover the costs this year because of the number of students we get went up... but we usually take a bit of the tuition money for this."

"Thank you!" chorused the preteens, ripping their wrapping paper and ooh'ing over the new toys. Harry received a portable FM/AM radio with cassette and CD, and a copy of U2's Achtung Baby.

Blaise received a pro Tennis racket, tennis ball package and Nike duffle bag to keep his gym clothes and items together.

Hermione happily found that her gift contained a two beginners' guides to Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, and a fountain pen with her name engraved on it.

"Enjoy!" the Headmistress said, leaving the room to find out who else had arrived and to give them their gifts.

Once again the trio began putting away their new gifts; Harry placed the CD on his dresser top and plugged it in, playing the CD while they relaxed. He also put the photograph of him and Blaise next to the CD player.

Once Dean, Neville and Susan had arrived, the group got together and offered thanks for their gifts, Harry explained about the anonymous sender of the invisibility cloak, causing everyone to "hmm" over it for a time. Nearing midnight, the group said goodnight and parted ways.

School would start the next day, and Harry was sure that Dumbledore would resume his quest to have Harry at Hogwarts as well – even Headmasters took a holiday break.

Harry knew that something fishy was going on at Hogwarts: why else would Dumbledore want Harry there, other than to watch him? Harry wasn't sure if Dumbledore wanted to watch him because he was in danger, or because Dumbledore had an ulterior motive in mind for Harry...

Harry did know that the Philosopher's Stone's diluted duplicate was somewhere in Hogwarts and it had drawn someone powerful to attempt a break-in and break-out at Gringott's. To Harry, there was only one person powerful enough to attempt it, and logic deduced it wasn't Dumbledore.

Voldemort was back.

And all Harry had to do now was figure out where he was, and make sure they didn't cross paths.

If they did...Harry shuddered.

Well, he'd deal with that when it happened.

AN: July.20.06 Another chapter of WA is now done:) I hope you all enjoy the new characters introduced and the interaction between Hogwarts and Wyckham students. It's progress over time.

Sorry it took so long for this chapter to come out – I was quite disappointed with Germany's defeat against the Italians for the FIFA World Cup and had a hard time not bashing poor Blaise and his family. I decide to wait until I was in a better mood, which my lovely Italian friends helped me with!

Once again: unedited scenes for other stories can be found on my Yahoo!Group with the link located in the profile page, or at [http/groups](http://groups). There is also a poll up; asking who you would like to see Harry romantically linked to in later 'books.'

Cheers! Kneazle

Chapter Five

Nothing too exciting happened between the months of January and March; classes picked up and the professors at Wyckham decided to have midterm tests three weeks into January.

Study groups were formed and the school hunkered down for intense study periods. Quidditch and football was still played, but due to the weather practices and games occurred inside the enlarged gymnasium. Harry ended up in the hospital room for two nights suffering from a broken arm after tumbling off his Nimbus 2000 broomstick (it was purchased for him via Wallace once he learned he was on the team).

That was where Harry first met Mabel McMillan and Christian Yamen, the two resident Healers, and in Christian's case, kinesiologist expert. Harry experienced Skele-Gro, a vile potion that allowed him to regrow broken (or removed, but he didn't want to know how that came about) bones, and spent the second day in the hospital room working with the muggleborn Dr. Yamen in an exercise regime to make sure the muscles in his broken arm would regain strength and keep their strength up.

Shacklebolt worked his students hard, alternating between curses and hexes and distinguishing them on his Thursday classes, and by focusing on dangerous creatures and their affects on Friday classes.

On one overcast and slightly drizzly Friday morning, Kingsley Shacklebolt brought in to class an ashwinder. It happily curled up around numerous red-hot coals found in wizard homes' fireplaces for Floo in a see-through iron cage, snoozing. Warning the class that the ashwinder was a third-class dangerous animal in the Ministry of Magic's Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, no one attempted to go near it.

Harry was captivated by the soft hisses the snake was making; as Shacklebolt spoke, Harry found himself tuning the man out while concentrating on the gray snake. Half-way through the lesson, Harry had missed the several nudges of concern and worry from Blaise and

the sharp jabs from Hermione; by this time, the ashwinder had woken up from its morning snooze and was idly surveying the class.

Its eerie red eyes glowed with an inner magic, its tongue flickering out and tasting the very air around it. It began to hiss lowly, causing Shacklebolt to stop mid-lecture (he had noticed Harry's inattention and wondered what caused it), peering down at the snake, unsure of what it wanted (Kingsley took pride in his job as an ex-Auror and making sure that any creatures he brought in to class were very well taken care of. Or else the Magical Creatures professor Vladimir Artur would have his hide).

After some hissing, a confused Shacklebolt scratched his head and blinked.

"She's hungry," said Harry in the silent class. "She said she'll be laying her eggs in a few weeks and she wants to eat a mouse."

Blaise turned to face his friend, blinking stupidly.

The rest of the first year class (consisting of Harry, Blaise, Hermione, Dean, Neville, Susan, Su Li, Lisa Turpin, Steven Cornfoot, Wayne Hopkins and Ernie MacMillan) had their mouths open – some in awe and others in half-horror.

The purebloods and half-bloods who understood what Harry did were torn between their upbringings while the muggleborns thought what Harry did was cool.

"Harry," began Kingsley, "How did you know what the ashwinder wanted?"

Harry shrugged. "She spoke." He looked around at the other students. "Didn't you hear her?"

"Harry," offered Hermione, "We heard a bunch of hisses... not words!"

"Oh." Face burning in embarrassment, Harry asked Kingsley, "So... um... what did I do?"

Kingsley Shacklebolt paused, before shrugging and answering in a lecture's voice, "Harry is what is known as a Parselmouth, a snake-speaker. Very rare and considered a trait of the Dark Arts, Parseltongue is the ability to understand and speak to snakes of all kinds. The preconceived idea of Parseltongue being a Dark Art is because Voldemort himself was a snake-speaker and was rumored to have a pet snake that did his bidding."

"I'm hardly a Dark wizard!" complained Harry, looking completely horrified. "I'm eleven!"

The class laughed and the tension eased out of the room. Shacklebolt smiled. "Exactly, Harry – you're not a Dark wizard, nor is Parseltongue truly a sign of a wizard or witch going evil. It's a special ability that you have... it doesn't define who you are or what you will become other than the fact that you've got an awesome opportunity to be a snake charmer if any other career choices go down the tubes!"

"Oh, good," sighed Harry in relief.

"So," continued Shacklebolt, "Can you ask this lovely ashwinder what she'd like to eat so that I can continue on in my lecture?"

Harry gratefully grinned at the professor who took what could have been an awkward situation into a funny experience. "Sure. Only, I don't know how to speak to her."

Su Li, a tiny Asian girl from a halfblood family spoke up. "Professor, if I may?" At Kingsley's nod, she continued, speaking to Harry. "I think you only have to concentrate on the snake and think you're speaking snake-language... then when we speak out loud, you'll be speaking in Parseltongue."

Harry nodded, getting out of his seat to squat before the ashwinder in her warm cage.

"Err... can you hear me?" he tried, concentrating hard on the snake, her shape, her eyes.

The snake recoiled in shock and hissed lowly. "You ssssspeak, human! What do you want of me?"

"Well, you see... um, this is our Defense against the Dark Arts class and I... uh, I heard that you were hungry?" began Harry hesitantly. "My professor wanted to uh... know what you, um, wanted to eat."

The snake hissed in pleasure. "How consssssiderate. A plump rat would sssufficce."

Harry nodded, turning away from the cage and frowned. "English?" he asked, hopefully. At Shacklebolt's nod, Harry said, "She would like, in her exact words: 'a plump rat would suffice.'"

Ernie MacMillan and Dean snorted in laughter and Kingsley Shacklebolt grinned, his teeth white against his skin. The professor left his side of the desk and walked into his room closet, leaving Harry standing at the front.

When Kingsley returned, he carried a large, squeaking rat. With his wand, he removed the ashwinders' lid and dropped the rat in; the class looked away while Harry heard the snake exclaim, "Ah – luncch, and jussst the way I like my ratssss... raw!"

Gagging slightly, Harry muttered to Blaise and an eager Hermione, "I think this might be more of a curse. I can hear the snake's delight in her juicy, yummy, crunchy rat."

Neville paled slightly from his seat behind Harry and Susan gagged before calming herself.

"Ew," she offered.

By 2pm, the entire school knew Harry was a Parselmouth; Vladimir Arthur had already cornered Harry and asked him if he wouldn't mind helping his class out when they covered Runespoors. Harry

stammered an agreement and a happy care of magical creatures professor walked away with an extra skip in his steps.

Other students came up to Harry asking him how it felt speaking another language, but Harry could only reply with: "I could swear I'm speaking English, only no one bloody understands me!"

Fred and George offered a good couple of laughs to a group of older students who seemed wary of Harry in the halls by shoving aside students and calling out loudly, "Dark wizard coming through! Watch out or else he'll kill you with his amazingly deadly garden snake!"

After that, the hype died down and everyone left Harry alone, except for Artur. The professor was almost in raptures and was constantly asking Harry if he wanted to try out his Parselmouth ability on any other reptiles.

Harry considered it, but asked if it could wait for next year or the year after when he got used to the idea first.

Unfortunately, two weeks after the revelation of Harry's Parselmouth ability became known to the Wyckham students, it hit the papers. The Daily Prophet slammed Harry's name and image, wondering how the "Golden Boy" of the wizard world could have inherited such a dark trait, especially coming from such a noble and intelligent line such as "Potter." He must have received it from his muggleborn mother.

Harry was furious when he read the article. He sent a letter off to Archibald Wallace, asking for a good lawyer to defend his name and family honor. Two days later, Wallace sent a reply with three names and interviews times attached – all to be conducted at Wyckham Academy on Harry's free time, if possible.

Anita and Flamel sat in on the interview process and Harry appreciated their input. In the end, he chose a Mr. Eric Doyle, a vicious but morally upstanding wizard citizen who was also Nicolas Flamel's second cousin's great-great-great-times-ten-grandson. Having family watch your every step would seriously increase the desire to win your case.

Harry did win the case: the Daily Prophet stopped their attack and issued a formal statement of apology, which Harry gracefully accepted. He did, however, unsubscribe to the newspaper.

Anita then had the displeasure of informing Harry of an impromptu meeting with the Minister of Magic: Cornelius Fudge. The man was coming to the school at the end of March for two reasons. One was to meet the “famous Harry Potter” and the other was to – on Dumbledore’s suggestion – create a Junior Quidditch League.

The latter was announced during mid-March, with a sour-faced Anita Hartz with a twitch in her left eye. Wyckham had no love for the Ministry, nor did the Ministry have any for the school (it was made abundantly clear during the first year of their opening that the Ministry wanted to control the syllabus. Hartz told them to bugger off).

Cornelius Fudge walked into Wyckham’s Café with energy and exuberance and an entourage of six. Harry was given leave of his classes and told to make up what he missed. Anita was the one who gave a tour of the school and its grounds with Harry acting as some sort of student representative.

Harry hated it.

Anita hated it.

His entourage knew it and hated it.

Fudge knew what was happening and hated it.

It wasn’t a very pleasant afternoon but they managed to trudge through it.

“So, Harry,” asked Fudge with a forced jovial tone, “how are you enjoying your schooling here?”

“Absolutely fine,” answered Harry. He tugged slightly at his tie to loosen it, and Anita smiled in support.

Fudge looked surprised. “Really?” He coughed. “I mean, well, I thought that you grew up with muggles and would want to get away from their mundane lifestyle. You know, learn all about your history as a wizard.”

“I enjoy combining the two. It seems rather silly to remove muggleborn students from six years of their previous schooling just because Hogwarts or any other magical school doesn’t want to merge their classes with non-magical ones.”

Anita beamed happily.

Fudge became flustered.

“But – but,” stammered Fudge, glancing at Harry curiously, “You think it’s a good idea to combine the two?”

“Yes,” answered Harry again. “When we graduate, we have more experience of a certain subject under our belts, so to speak, and will be more desirable in the job market than a Hogwarts’ graduate. We have specialty classes that aim to increase a students’ skill in that area.”

Fudge looked slightly contemplative (or constipated), and the rest of the tour was silent with the exception of Hartz pointing out various items of interest.

Finally, Harry was sent to his dorm room and Hartz and Fudge hid themselves in Hartzs’ office to discuss the Junior Quidditch League.

That night at dinner, once Fudge had left, Anita stood and asked for the schools’ attention.

“I know some of you have heard the rumors and others are wondering which are true and false. Let me now make it official: Wyckham will join Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the Aberclythe Institute of Magic in forming a Junior Quidditch League.”

Whispers and hushed voices began in the café.

Hartz continued. "Technically, Quidditch season for schools runs between October and May. Because of this, our seven teams at Wyckham will also compete for the chance to play in the League; while still recreational, there will now be a competitive edge to the game. The winner plays Hogwarts and Aberclythe. I still expect students to play fairly and with sportsmanship."

Those on the Quidditch teams began to cheer and talk among themselves, but Hartz wasn't done.

"Finally," she called, raising her voice. "Finally, the League will begin this year, effective now. Aberclythe has already agreed, and so has Hogwarts – as it was Albus Dumbledore's idea of school unity and bringing new students in to meet and mingle. As such, Professors Flamel, Blake, Shackbolt, Sgt. Donahue, Dr. Yamen and I will review the past games played this year. We will then slowly disqualify teams to play for the League, but the award ceremony will continue at the end of the year as scheduled, without the League's interference."

She sat down and the Café was abuzz with news and game plays being discussed. Those at Wyckham had a much better chance to win the overall game, being that they played seven teams: Hogwarts only had four house teams and Aberclythe had two.

"Ceremony?" questioned Blaise to the Weasley Twins, "What's that?"

George spoke up. "At the end of every school year the Headmistress, Flamel and Blake give out awards based on grades, extracurricular activities and improvement. You could get an award for Most Valuable Player for Quidditch or Best Overall Grade for your year."

Hermione looked thoughtful and then asked, "Is that smart, though? What about the students who think they deserve the awards and then don't receive one?"

Fred laughed. "The awards' ceremony is pomp, really. It just looks good for parents to see it done for an incredibly private school, but everyone walks away with excellent grades, a letter to their parents

about how well their student did, and a gift certificate to a store in Diagon Alley.”

“Are the gift certificates all different?” asked Neville.

George nodded and Fred replied, “We get twenty pounds for joke stores in London and ten galleons for Zonko’s. Oliver gets twenty galleons for Quality Quidditch Supplies.”

“Neat!” exclaimed Susan. “It’s completely individualized so everyone feels as though they’ve won something.”

Harry remained quiet but Blaise noticed and called him on it when they were back in their dorm room.

“You were quiet this afternoon. Was it because of Fudge?” asked Blaise.

Harry shook his head and watched as Hedwig soared out of the bedroom window with Marius alongside.

“Then what?”

“The League.”

“Are you unhappy with it?”

“A bit, Blaise,” sighed Harry as he sat on his bed. “I have a feeling it’s because Dumbledore knows I’m on a team here and it’s another way to keep an eye on me.”

Blaise frowned, glancing at his friend. “But...” his eyes lit up in understanding. “It’s being held at Hogwarts, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” answered Harry. “Hartz kept it quiet for now, but it’ll come out sooner or later. I know she did that to spare me any pain or whatever, but it’s obvious to those who know what is going on between Dumbledore and me.”

“Do you not want to go? The Pirates can find another seeker, although I think Wood would kill you,” joked Blaise. Harry grinned back at his best friend and nodded.

“Oh, I’ll go if we win, but something might happen to me that will make me stay at Hogwarts.”

“We won’t let it happen. You know Dr. Yamen and Healer McMillan wouldn’t let you stay anywhere you found detrimental to your health and recovery!”

“I know,” smiled Harry. “Let’s deal with it when it happens, eh?”

Blaise nodded and the two crawled under their covers.

Harry, unfortunately, slept fitfully.

In April, the professors organized an Easter Egg Hunt that took place over the entire campus: it occurred on a Sunday and the chocolate and treats found by the students were theirs to keep gorging themselves on.

Jewish students were offered the opportunity to go home for Passover; other religious holidays that April (Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist, and others) were honored and students who celebrated their religious observation days were given leniency.

There were no more articles in the Daily Prophet about attempts of the Philosopher’s Stone, or any other powerful object of interest. In fact, all that Harry and his friends learnt about was that stocks for Zonko’s, the Nimbus production line and various other small businesses were up; the Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge was having difficulty in keeping with a goblin treaty; and an amusing editorial by an angry mother of a Hogwarts’ student against potions professor Severus Snape.

Flamel’s potions classes were some of Harry’s favourites (along with Defense, Charms and history). In their first semester, they learned

about proper storing techniques and the proper way to cut, mash, or grind potions ingredients. They worked on easy potions like a boil cure potion and a forgetfulness potion before moving on to swelling solutions and a hair-raising potion. Their homework over the Christmas break was to start their own potions chart, similar to the Periodic Table of Elements for the chemistry classes.

Harry, Dean, Susan and Neville copied diligently off of Hermione and Blaise who had the neatest, easiest to read and most simplified chart out of the entire first year class. Blaise then sold copies for a profit of three sickles a chart.

In the spring semester, they started on slightly more dangerous potions like a shrinking solution.

Flamel was a good teacher: he wasn't too stern and harsh, but rather kind and gentle with reprimands if someone missed a step or was confused.

Neville found potions to be his worst subject, but was a genius at pointing out what plants were when used and their properties. As such, Flamel found it easy (and helpful for the rest of the class) if they covered plants and their properties in certain potions.

Neville gained much confidence from those "mini-lessons" and received A's on quizzes. It was during one of those mini-lessons that Hermione raised her hand while the other continued to use a glass ladle to stir her potion.

"Yes, Hermione?" asked Flamel, leaning against his desk, and crossing his arms in comfort.

Blushing under the direct looks of classmates, Hermione asked quietly, "I was wondering sir, if you knew why there wasn't a pre-made periodic table of potions ingredients? I'm not complaining about making one ourselves, it helps to remember properties of ingredients better... but I would think that there would already be one to help students."

Flamel sighed and pushed away from the desk, reaching for a stool tucked under a granite countertop that ran along two sides of the classroom (one against the windows overlooking the main drive and the other along the windows and facing the garage driveway). The first years' had fewer in number than some of the elder years, so each student had their own lab station to work at.

"What you must remember, Hermione," he began, while addressing the rest of the class with a wide-sweeping gaze, "Is that Wyckham Academy has only been around for five years. Before that, everyone attended Hogwarts or a very, very private school called Aberclythe in Wales. Hogwarts doesn't have the crunch classes that Wyckham offers. The shrinking solution we did last class is part of the third year requirements at Hogwarts – we push you to learn faster but we spend more time with you overall than Hogwarts does.

"The one thing that Wyckham prides itself on over Hogwarts and Aberclythe is that we mix non-magical with magical techniques and books for subjects." Flamel waved a hand at their work benches. "Have you ever seen a potions lab at Hogwarts or Aberclythe like ours? You have Bunsen burners, electronic thermometers, test tubes, hot plates, safety goggles and lab coats over your uniforms. No other potions laboratory has these things."

"So," spoke up Steven Cornfoot, a tall, mousy blond boy with square jaw and blue eyes, "You're saying that Wyckham is more innovative than the other schools in the UK?"

"Yes," said Flamel, nodding at Steven. "Because of that, no other wizard or witch in the other schools would consider using or making their own table of elements; most still frown upon 'muggle'"——he made quotation marks here—— "discoveries or technology. A lot of pureblood traditionalists will believe their techniques and the way it's always been done is the best.

"I'm giving you the opportunity to improve on the wizard worlds' passivity and am giving you a way to help yourselves do better."

The class fell silent, mulling over what Flamel said. The students from Hogwarts that he met with Blaise at the Minister's Ball were snotty;

they thought they were better because they had a house define who they were and because they went to the thousand-year-old, historical, traditional Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

They believed that the courses they took meant more because of their talented professors (never mind that Flamel taught at Wyckham). They didn't want to go to a school where muggles taught some subjects because what would muggles know about magic anyway?

Harry sighed and continued to stir his burn salve potion; it was supposed to be creamy and white in colour. The recipient should be able to scoop out the soothing cream to apply directly from creation. Harry's potion was a bit stringy and on the green side from the crushed mint leaves they added in.

As Flamel came around the room to check on the students' works, he paused here and there. At Harry's station, between Neville and Blaise, Flamel leaned over the cauldron and twitched his nose.

"I believe you added a bit too much mint into your potion Harry," smiled the old wizard. "It'll still work, but it'll give an overwhelming aroma of mint when used."

"Maybe it could have a dual purpose to open up nasal passages and ease breathing if I used eucalyptus leaves instead of mint," mused Harry out loud.

Flamel looked surprised for a moment before contemplative. "If you've got spare time, you might want to work on that hypothesis. As far as I know, Perenelle and I still use smelling salts and any sort of charms to keep someone calm if their breathing becomes erratic."

Looking stunned, Harry managed to stammer out a, "Perhaps I will, sir," before blushing furiously and looking down at his cauldron. There were times when, with his friends and Blaise's family, he could act like himself without fear of judgment; but the second he was around a member of the faculty or someone he respected, he would turn back into that shy boy who lives under the cupboard at number 4 Privet Drive.

In Dance, the first years had finished with body posture and basic steps; they were moving on to salsa, something which excited the girls in the class and made the few boys cringe. Glad he had Hermione as a partner, Harry found that her constant bossy remarks made him work harder and by the end of the lesson they managed the first part of a slightly complicated routine.

Unfortunately, it was hard for Harry to concentrate on the steps with a partner in his arms as well as lead, so he was constantly mumbling, "one... two... three... step forward right, step forward left, turn..." to Hermione's amusement.

One by one the students with partners (Harry and Hermione, Susan and Wayne Hopkins, Su Li with Steven Cornfoot) began to do the routine to the best of their ability until they would falter. Their instructors Liam Flannery and Cassie Ambrose would then critique them and tell them what to improve on.

Harry and Hermione led the group, beginning first. Harry had his hand on Hermione's waist, his other hand holding hers. The song came on, beginning slowly and the two slowly began a parody of the waltz, until the Latin undertones came through. Harry spun out Hermione, sweat beading down his cheek, and together they did the steps: right foot forward, right foot back, half-turn right, half-turn left.

They continued until Harry faltered under a difficult and fast salsa move, causing Hermione to stumble. Harry caught her and the two caught their breath as their instructors complimented them.

Harry enjoyed dance class; it was different from Sgt. Donahue's military-like drills. Where Sgt. Donahue pushed for them to improve their stamina and overall physical ability, dance tended to concentrate on improving mental and physical ability together. Harry was also gaining muscle mass but remained lean due to his dance classes (Neville and Dean had put on muscle and gained a bit more height and shoulder breadth since they began school).

Charms with Emily Schmidt were always combining practicality with fun. As an older woman, Professor Schmidt had taught as Durmstrang before taking up the position at Wyckham. She had seen

a lot of sour-faced and stern-looking students at the very secretive school, and wanted to put some more 'fun' into their studies. She found that if students enjoyed what was being taught, they would remember it better.

The class that Harry attended that April morning was particularly fun: students were given potatoes, doll clothes, and spent the entire class period animating their potatoes. Groups formed and soon Harry, Blaise, and Neville had a potato-version of the Three Stooges (they had seen some of their skits the Friday before, for the weekly movie night). Susan, Dean and Hermione created dancing potatoes and enjoyed giving them ridiculously impossible moves – ballerina twirls and foot-high leaps.

Professor Schmidt had a good time as well, even when Steven Cornfoot's potato went sailing past her and hit the brick wall, serving mashed potatoes.

Cornfoot was given another potato, and although he was beet red, the boy managed to get his potato to take part in Su Li and Wayne Hopkin's opera rendition of Phantom of the Opera.

Neville informed his friends that history at Hogwarts was a snore, taught by a ghost who bore his students "to death." Harry wondered if the professor there wanted ghostly company in his class.

At Wyckham, however, history was taught by the pureblooded professor Ryan Lenoir, a French transplant in England who was teaching history at a community college in London before taking up the position at Wyckham.

He wasn't judgmental, or had a skewed perception of history that other witches and wizards had. Instead, he was socially inept and had a true love for cultural history. He could spend hours on Goblin Rebellions or on the Egyptian wizards of Cairo, but ask him what he thought of Cornelius Fudge and he'd reply with a blank, "Who?"

Harry loved his history class; ever since he first walked in Diagon Alley with Anita Hartz and she explained the different opinions that wizards had about 'history,' Harry was interested in learning the truth.

Lenoir began teaching his first year class with a clip from Back to the Future, but then branched out and began with the Spanish Inquisition, moving forward in time from there. While Harry wanted to learn more about the Egyptian wizards, medieval wizards, and Druids, he knew that those topics weren't taught until the later years due to content and the immense detail that went in to studying about that history.

Instead, Harry enjoyed the class, asking questions when he was confusing one goblin for another and being gently corrected. Hermione seemed to be the only other one interested in history, but Harry thought that was because Hermione felt that her 'muggleborn' status in the wizard world was her insecurity; trying to learn about wizard history and excel at her subjects was her way of showing up purebloods who knew history and magic since birth.

As May came and slowly went, Hartz announced that the Pirates, one of the schools' Quidditch teams, would be going to Hogwarts in June for the Junior Quidditch League.

Harry was dismayed at first, but soon joined in the cheers and laughs of Oliver Wood, Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, Fred and George, and Blaise. The rest of the school joined in, although some Quidditch players were subdued; they had hoped to go.

Because of their status as the Wyckham representatives, Hartz called them a week later into her office.

"All right, let's get down to the nitty-gritty," she began, after they all sat in comfortable chairs facing her desk.

"Dumbledore has asked that you come to Hogwarts a day early to join in the pre-game meet-and-greet, as well as take a tour of the castle." She rolled her eyes. "I'm quite aware that four of you here are Hogwarts' transfers and hardly need a reminder of what Hogwarts' looks like, but I'm guessing it's mainly for Alicia, Blaise and Harry."

"We can show them around, Professor," offered Wood.

“And I’d appreciate that, Oliver, because to be honest, I know Hogwarts’ is large and I’d rather have the whole team stick together because of that,” Hartz explained, sighing and resting her head on a propped up hand. She twirled a pen with her right hand in a show of anxiety. “Dumbledore also would like the team members to bring a few friends. I think he wants a contingent of Wyckham students so that his students can mingle. Either that or he wants to show off Hogwarts and have us all in raptures.”

The Twins laughed, but saw the glance between Blaise and Harry.

“So, you can invite two people to join you to Hogwarts. We’ll be traveling by coach bus to Hogwarts on June fourth, leaving Wyckham at six am.”

“What about the final football game against Callaghan?” asked Oliver. “Harry’s also on the team, he has to be here on the third for it.”

“I know it’s an evening game and Callaghan is famous for dragging its games out,” agreed Anita, “but I’m fairly confident that you’ll end the game quickly Oliver, just so you can have enough sleep. If it goes on late, oh well – you can sleep on the bus and miss the meet-and-greet. I don’t particularly care for it, but it seems certain Quidditch players and scouts will be there.”

The older team members perked up at this news and Angelina asked, “Who might they be, Professor?”

“Gwenog Jones, Alasdair Maddock, the manager of Puddlemere United Philbert Deverill, and Ludo Bagman are all confirmed.” Hartz rubbed her temples. “Honestly, it’s going to be a publicity nightmare. There will be reporters everywhere for the games and with Harry going, they’ll hound you.”

“How are the games going to be played?” asked Oliver, frowning at Harry and mentally making a note to have the team around him at all times. He was the star seeker, after all.

“You’ll play a best out of three. Three games against Hogwarts, three games against Aberclythe. It’ll take three days overall to finish the

League not including the fourth, and Flamel and Blake will be with you as chaperons,” said Anita, looking sternly at the students to let them know that there would be no arguments on that. “The games start on the fifth, where you play three games per day. We first play Aberclythe at nine am on the fifth, and then Hogwarts at two. Hogwarts and Aberclythe then play each other at seven.

“You’ll receive a copy of the schedule when you arrive. You are excused from classes, but expected to make up or study while at Hogwarts. You will wear your uniforms at all times, except for when the games are done on the evening of the seventh at the Cup ceremony. You will behave in an acceptable way. I don’t want to hear Flamel and Blake complaining about any of you or your guests when you return.”

The students nodded and agreed, and permission forms were sent that evening to their parents. In Harry’s case, Anita knew the Dursley’s might not sign just to annoy Harry, so she went over personally and threatened them again with the police.

They meekly complied and informed Hartz that they would pick Harry up on the last day of term, June 26th, at King’s Cross and take him home from there.

Anita raised her eyebrows. “And will he be under the cupboard again?”

At her cool voice, the Dursley’s shuddered and Petunia squeaked out, “No. We’ve cleaned out the second spare bedroom for him. It’s his.”

“Good.”

Anita told Harry all this later that evening when he came to her office to share his view on the League. Anita agreed completely and told Harry to be on his guard; if the ‘stone’ was at Hogwarts, Voldemort would be as well.

Well, thought Harry as he went back to his dorm room, So much for avoiding the Evil One. I’d best tell my friends, especially if we can bring two guests each. They’ll all be coming to Hogwarts.

Harry sighed. Suddenly, the school year got much more complicated than it had weeks ago.

Chapter Six

The morning of June fourth dawned not bright and early, but dewy and overcast, with thundering rumbling in the distance and sheets of rain pouring down hard against the windowpane in Blaise and Harry's room.

The two had been up for half-an-hour already, sorting through their gym clothes and separating them, and wondering if they could bring Harry's portable radio. They finally decided against it.

"What did Mum want to talk to you about?" asked Blaise suddenly as a flash of lightning lit up the semi-dark room; a roar of thunder followed barely seconds after.

Harry looked up from folding his Pirates jersey and rolled his eyes. "Apparently she's taken me under her wing because she gave me pointers on dealing with the media. She told me to make sure I look my best, coolly reply with 'no comment' if I'm not interested and to make sure I smile prettily at all the women."

Blaise ogled Harry. "Are you serious?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

Groaning, Blaise shoved his rumpled jersey, pants and shin guards in his gym bag. "I can't believe she did that."

"Well, she did," answered Harry. He frowned. "Are you brining your broomstick?"

"Of course I am! I'm going to shrink it though and ask Blake or someone else to enlarge it." Blaise suddenly began muttering. "Stupid Ministry rules and underage magic..."

Harry chuckled and decided to follow Blaise's lead in the broomsticks. He had, by this time, finished packing and was sitting on his bed, watching Blaise pack his last items.

“By the way,” his best friend began, looking up at Harry, “I forgot to say last night, but you were bloody brilliant!”

“Thanks,” answered Harry modestly. “But you and I know I still have lots to learn this summer to make first string for the football team. It was only bad luck that Pucey took that flip over the other team’s striker and got a concussion.”

Blaise made a non-committal noise just as a knock sounded on their room door. Striding over and opening it, Harry welcomed a yawning contingent of first year students into his and Blaise’s room.

Hermione immediately fell onto Harry’s bed, and although usually bright-eyed in the morning, the friends had been up late celebrating the football team’s victory. She and Susan Bones cuddled together and were soon lightly dozing. Dean and Neville leaned against various pieces of furniture, watching silently as Blaise finished packing and zipping up his duffle bag. Once completed, Blaise nodded in satisfaction.

“All set?” a new voice asked. Those awake (or barely) turned to face Matthew Blake, who smiled at Hermione and Susan on Harry’s bed. “Wake them up; we’ll be on the road for some time, even if we’re in a magical bus.”

Blaise poked Hermione and Susan, who, grumbling, made their way with the boys down to the entrance hall.

Oliver Wood, Fred and George Weasley, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet were already there with their friends: Adrian Pucey who was Oliver’s best friend, Lee Jordan, the twins’ prankster-in-training and friend, Allan Bradley and Patrick Summers (the last two being Angelina and Alicia’s boyfriends).

None of the older students wished to abuse their “two person” tagalong, but distantly understood having all of Harry and Blaise’s friends join – they only brought one friend each.

Matthew and Flamel did a head count, happy that everyone was on time and slightly awake. Flamel began, “Now that you’re all here, and

if I'm correct in assuming no one has had breakfast, Headmistress Hartz arranged for us to stop in at La Baguette on Duke Street in Brighton."

The students perked up at the news.

Blake continued. "We'll be on the road from – technically – eight in the morning to noon, where we'll reach Manchester. Yes, we are in a magical coach bus that will take us to Scotland within ten hours. In Manchester, we'll eat lunch Rosco's for an hour. Back on the bus for one in the afternoon and by three should everything go according to schedule, we'll be half an hour past through the area of Trossachs and not stop in Lochearnhead. Hogwarts is approximately an hour into the 'wilds,' so we'll be somewhere between Killin and wherever Hogsmeade is located."

"Hopefully we'll make good time, so everyone out of the school, we're leaving now!" Flamel grinned.

The students groaned and grabbed their bags, trudging them outside into the light rain where house elves were waiting to place them on the coach. The older students claimed the back seats of the coach, happily curling into their seats, leaning them back and falling asleep.

Oliver and Adrian, however, pulled down a tray and began talking about strategies while Harry and his friends sat in the middle to the front of the coach, in pairs. Flamel and Blake joined the group, did another head count and spoke briefly to the driver.

They were soon leaving Wyckham behind. Harry, who never had the opportunity to travel anywhere in England, let alone to Scotland because of his status with the Dursley's, found he could not sleep and enjoyed watching the scenery pass in a blur until the bus was slowing and they were giving Blake their breakfast orders.

Neville sat next to Harry, snoring slightly in a snort before waking up; Harry asked for his breakfast order and pointed at Blake who was waking Hermione and Blaise.

After the business professor had asked Harry and Neville what they wanted, Neville turned to Harry and began a small conversation.

"I've never been to Hogwarts, except once when I was a baby," he said, rubbing his cheek. It had the seat's fabric indented into him.

"I don't think I've ever been," responded Harry.

Neville frowned. "I bet you have; Gran mentioned seeing your parents there and you and I must have played together while at Hogwarts. They used to have meetings, I think."

"Meetings?" laughed Harry. "And for what reason would your parents or mine have a meeting at Hogwarts? They weren't professors or researchers there!"

Neville shrugged. "I'm sure I've heard Gran mention it once before, although I was very young at the time. And," Neville paused, both boys thanking Blake as he brought back their warm and buttered scones and orange juice, "And I think it had something to do with the war."

Harry sobered. Suddenly, with the threat of Voldemort being at Hogwarts, talking about the war and his dead parents made Harry a bad conversationalist. Neville understood and they silently ate their scones and buns. Neville soon fell asleep and Harry, although slightly troubled, drifted off soon after him.

Lunch was a quiet affair, with the majority of the students sleepy and anxious. Oliver and Adrian tried to rile the team up, but when Angelina told them to sod off, they miraculously quieted down.

It wasn't until they passed Killin, Scotland that the group began to perk up; the Pirates Quidditch team by now was a bundle of anxious nerves; they were going to meet some of the most famous witches and wizards of the Quidditch League and show off their skills in front of scouts. Oliver and Adrian – although Adrian wasn't playing this year at the League – were hoping that Philbert Deverill, the

Puddlemere United manager would notice Oliver's skills and arrange an informal meeting.

The teams' support was anxious too, but for another reason. Harry's friends knew of Harry's worries. With Voldemort possibly at Hogwarts, Blaise, Hermione, Susan, Neville and Dean inwardly vowed to watch their friends' back for anyone with suspicious behaviour.

However, on the first day of the competition, all they had to worry about was finding their room accommodation and making it through the large crowds.

Even past Hogsmeade, there were lineups to enter the impressive gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The students who had never seen the school before pressed up against the windows, eager to see the world-renowned school and its prestigious land holdings.

The youngest students ooh'ed and ahh'ed appropriately, taking in the wonders of the Quidditch Pitch in the distance (decked out in the Hogwarts colours of green, red, blue and yellow for their houses), the greenhouses and the impressive sight of the large, Anglo-Saxon based castle that had numerous add-ons from various time periods that followed.

"It's beautiful," breathed Hermione from across Harry and Neville. Harry silently agreed, but wondered if there was a hidden danger in Hogwarts that did not present itself at first glance. After all, if Hogwarts: a History was to be believed, the castle was built in the tenth to eleventh century, a time of warfare and conquest. Hogwarts may be beautiful, but Harry knew that beautiful things were also some of the deadliest as well.

The coach purred up to the large front doors of Hogwarts, where Albus Dumbledore and a few others stood waiting. Refreshment tables were set off to the right, down near the lake, and the grounds were covered with elderly wizards and witches and schoolchildren as they awaited the first ever game of the Junior Quidditch League.

The coach stopped, and Blake and Flamel exited, speaking to the Hogwarts professors first. Satisfied, they climbed back onboard the coach and motioned for the students to leave, and grab their bags from the storage compartment.

Harry was behind Blaise, glancing around with observing eyes; the Weasley twins made a production of exiting the coach and numerous students around the bus cheered for their return.

“All right, Harry?” asked Dean quietly, coming up beside his friend. When Harry didn’t reply, Dean continued, hesitantly, “We won’t let anything happen to you. I swear it.”

Harry turned to look at his friend. He smiled, a little waveringly, and nodded. “I know,” he replied solemnly, but turned when Blaise called his name and tossed him his bag.

Blaise slung his duffle bag over his right shoulder and threw his other arm over Harry’s shoulders. “Harry! Ready for an exciting game of Quidditch, viewed by the entirety of the wizard world in Britain?”

Harry shot Blaise a withering look. “Absolutely not.”

Blaise laughed and steered Harry toward Blake, where he handed out a piece of parchment.

“This is your schedule for the next three and a half days. Tonight is the meet and greet. As Hartz explained back at Wyckham, remain in your uniforms at all times and behave accordingly,” he shot a glance at the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan as he said this. “Other than that, you are allowed to wander around the school in groups.”

Flamel jumped into the conversation here. “However – the third floor corridor is...” he rolled his eyes. “...Forbidden. So please avoid it. Stay outside and join the rest of the students in the Great Hall for dinner tonight.”

Flamel waved the students off, but Blake decided to follow the twins and Lee Jordan, just in case. Oliver and Adrian stopped Harry before Hermione dragged him away, though.

“Stay outside,” said Oliver, a hand on Harry’s shoulder, his voice low. “The rest of the team will be outside and we’ll be able to watch you this way. Hartz is worried, and I can understand why.”

Adrian picked up the rest of the conversation. “You’re the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry. We can’t put it past someone wanting to hurt you tonight, or during the games.”

“I understand.” Harry paused. “There’s a chance that something will happen to me...”

“What do you mean?” asked Oliver.

Harry frowned and looked both teens in their eyes. “What if Voldemort isn’t really dead?”

Oliver and Adrian looked at each other, their lips tight and frowning. “If that’s true...” began Oliver hesitantly, “Then you need to be extra careful.”

“How about the team has a warning signal?” suggested Adrian. “When any of us need help – we’ll teach it to the rest of the Wyckham Quidditch teams when we return.”

“It has to be something that wouldn’t be said in every day conversation,” laughed Harry lightly. “Like peanut butter.”

“No,” smiled Adrian, “How about ‘William Shakespeare ate my socks’?”

The three laughed.

“Sounds good!” exclaimed Oliver. “And even if you can’t get the whole phrase out, a part would let us know.”

Harry thanked the teenagers, offered them a smile, and nodded once before leaving with his friends.

“D’you think he’ll be okay?” asked Adrian, watching Harry and his friends disappear into the crowd.

Oliver, with his hands on his hips and feet spread wide apart, sighed. “Yeah, he’ll be okay. He’s a tough little lad.” He paused. “But he’ll deal with some crazy shit first, though.”

Hermione was clutching her schedule while Blaise and Harry ogled the blurs that were some of the wizard world’s best Quidditch players. The group was at the Quidditch Pitch, sitting in the stands away from some of the Hogwarts students and reporters.

Neville was explaining to Dean the Quidditch League’s history – to the best of his recollection, he never was a large fan – while Susan and Hermione were slightly giggly; Harry assumed it was of the Hogwarts and Aberclythe seventh years who were doing stretches on the Quidditch Pitch’s stadium floor without their shirts on.

“Is that the Hogwarts’ team, getting ready to do a mock game?” asked Blaise rhetorically, pointing at the stadium floor.

Harry shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know the difference between Hogwarts and Aberclythe, other than whatever colours they will wear.”

Hermione, ever the knowledgeable one, spoke up. “Traditionally, Hogwarts’ colours are all four of their houses: red, blue, yellow and green; Aberclythe is red and black. As you know, Wyckham is blue and black. I’m guessing the students will be wearing those colours when playing.”

“Great,” said Harry sarcastically, “When we play Hogwarts we’ll be playing against a bloody rainbow.”

Blaise snorted and Dean and Neville laughed. Susan and Hermione glared reproachfully, but soon the group was laughing, directing stares in their direction. One savvy reporter noticed Harry and shouted.

“Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter! A minute of your time, please!”

This caught the attention of other nearby reporters, who, conflicted on what they wanted to do, finally decided to crowd Harry and his friends.

At the first reporter’s shout, the boys immediately settled around Harry protectively, and Hermione and Susan sat on the bench below Harry, effectively creating a blocked square around him. The reporters settled just below Hermione and Susan.

“A few questions,” said Harry slowly, looking at each journalist in their eyes, “And then my friends and I will be going to dinner.”

It was a warning, and the journalists understood. They began asking questions, but Hermione stalled them with a hand and pointed to one.

“Mr. Potter,” the young man gulped, “Sean Berkley of the Dublin Daily. How are you finding Wyckham Academy?”

“Very well, thank you,” replied Harry confidently.

“What classes are you taking?”

“Defense against the Dark Arts, English, math, potions, charms, transfiguration, and history. I’m also taking a dance class and gym.”

Another reporter spoke up. “Alfonso Mirada, Spanish Inquisition. What made you choose Wyckham over Hogwarts, Mr. Potter?”

“It was because Wyckham offered non-magical classes. Overall, there are more classes to choose from as the years progress, allowing you to pick and choose courses that interest you and could potentially help you later on when you decide what career you want,” explained Harry. “I know my parents went to Hogwarts, and that it was – up until five years ago – the leader in British wizardry schooling, but I find that without change, society cannot grow and prosper.”

Harry inwardly let out a tiny breath of relief. That was nearly verbatim of Francesca Zabini, who was sure that question would be asked. Harry had recited her answer word-for-word.

There were murmurs of interest between the reporters, some who nodded and others who scowled.

“Mr. Potter,” began another voice, an oily and cultured female one, “What is the reason for your arguments with Albus Dumbledore?” She smiled. “Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet.”

The woman who asked was well-dressed and well-manicured; she had curly blonde hair and icy eyes, wearing outlandishly vibrant clothing. A flash of a light bulb went off beside her. A quill hovered and quivered over a piece of parchment, which Harry supposed was recording everything he said – and potentially twisting it.

“No comment.”

She pouted, opening her mouth to ask another question, but Hermione pointed to another journalist and they shot Rita a triumphant grin.

“Heidi Weisberg, Die Deutscher Zeitung, Mr. Potter,” the woman said with a Germanic accent. “Are you playing in the Junior Quidditch League, and what position are you playing if you are?”

“Yes, and seeker,” said Harry proudly. “I had originally wanted to try out for Chaser, but my best friend here – Blaise Zabini – tried it first and that prompted me to try for Seeker. It was a good thing I did!”

“Are you nervous?” asked Giselle Journée of the Paris Nationale.

“A little,” admitted Harry with a shaky laugh. “I’m dead tired today too – Wyckham’s football team, which I play second string striker, played against another school last night. I ended up playing for the second half, and the game didn’t end until near midnight.”

The journalists laughed too, and Blaise smirked. Harry had them wrapped around his finger.

Looking around, though, he noticed most students leaving the pitch to return to the school and nudged Harry. Harry glanced at Blaise, saw what he motioned at, and nodded.

"If you excuse us, ladies and gentlemen," began Harry, standing in sync with his friends, "But it seems as though dinner will begin soon. We'll speak again later."

The journalists agreed and backed off, while Rita Skeeter's photographer continued to click and flash away.

"That'll be front page Daily Prophet tomorrow," muttered Neville, as they left the Pitch behind.

Blaise nodded, but Susan spoke up. "Skeeter's a real shrew. She'll change the story around to suit her purpose and sell more papers. Get ready to sue, Harry."

Harry nodded grimly, joining the queue to enter the Great Hall. "Where are we sitting?"

"Our schedule says that all schools are given special tables as representatives," answered Hermione, tapping her parchment.

Sure enough, there were two extra, round tables in front of the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables in the Great Hall. Harry was beginning to worry; here he was, at Hogwarts like Dumbledore wanted, and so far he had ignored him. Something, surely, was going to happen.

Once he and his friends were seated, Oliver and the other team members sat and began talking about what they did. Blake and Flamel sat at the Head's Table with the other professors of Hogwarts and Aberclythe.

Although his friends chattered loudly about what they had seen or about the reporters with the older teammates, Harry couldn't help but overhear the voices coming from around him – and about him.

“...Did you see his scar?”

“...He spoke to the reporters, and we real cool about it!”

“...He’s apparently really smart...”

“...Best friend with Blaise Zabini...”

“...Consorts with mudbloods and purebloods alike...”

“...famous...”

“He’s the Boy-Who-Lived!”

“...Do you think he remembers what You-Know-Who looks like?”

“...wonder if he’ll go out on a date with you, Parvati...” Giggles.

Feeling his face redden, Harry consciously worried about eating his mashed potatoes and making sure nothing caught on his chin. Hermione and Blaise watched him with wary and shrewd eyes, like they overheard the people talking and knew his reaction.

Once he and everyone else in the Great Hall had their fill of the wonderful food, Albus Dumbledore stood and swept his arms wide, ready to make an announcement.

“Now that you all have full stomachs, let me begin by saying: welcome! Welcome, Aberclythe and Wyckham to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! Thank you for joining coming here to participate in the newly-created Junior Quidditch League!

“But first, allow me to introduce the fine students and professors from each school, including their participating Quidditch team.”

Albus Dumbledore swept his arms wide, to his right where Aberclythe’s table and professors sat at the Head Table.

“Aberclythe Institute, formed in 1957, has had nearly thirty years to perfect their image and courses. Designed to introduce the crème de

la crème wizards and witches into society, Aberclythe's students are given the necessary skills to find work or make a suitable home.

"The professors who decided to come along are Headmaster Boyd, and Transfiguration professor Nathan Phelps. Their excellent Quidditch team includes captain and Seeker James Dubois, Keeper Audrey Wells, Chasers Peter and Markus Hunt and Gregory Kilburn, and Beaters Hank Savoy and Bradley Morningside."

Harry and the rest of the Great Hall in Hogwarts gave a scattering of polite applause, as each member of the Quidditch team stood when their name was called.

Dumbledore then swept his arm to his left, where Flamel and Blake sat, slightly uncomfortable, but nevertheless amused at the pomp and circumstance.

"And here at my left is Wyckham Academy's Vice-Headmaster Nicolas Flamel, notable Alchemist and potions professor, as well as Matthew Blake, CEO of Blake Communications and business professor. Wyckham is a recent school, teaching both muggle and magical subjects to its students.

"The Quidditch team that has joined us in the competition is one of seven located at Wyckham; I am told that this participating team is known as 'the Pirates.' They include several previous Hogwarts students, such as their captain and Keeper Oliver Wood, Beaters Fred and George Weasley and Chaser Angelina Johnson. Others are the remaining two Chasers, Alicia Spinnet and Blaise Zabini. Their Seeker is none other than the Boy-Who-Lived himself, Harry Potter."

Harry groaned. He hated his fame; he really did, but stood with the rest of the team at their names. Almost immediately after his name was called, the school burst into cheers and applause, all craning their necks to see the Harry Potter.

Harry had to wonder if Dumbledore was deliberately putting him last to make more of a statement. It was proven, after all, that the majority of people only remember that first and last things spoken to them.

As soon as he could, Harry sat back down in his seat and concentrated on the rest of Dumbledore's speech. He was tired, sore from yesterday's football match, and more than ready for a good night's rest.

"Finally, allow me to introduce our home Quidditch team: captain and Chaser Charles Warrington, Slytherin; Chasers Kenneth Towler and Katie Bell, Gryffindors. Keeper Richard Summerby, Hufflepuff; the Beaters are Henry Bole and Derrick Clark, Slytherin; and Seeker Cho Chang, Ravenclaw."

Hogwarts erupted into more cheers, and Harry was beginning to have a splitting headache.

"Yes, yes, settle down..." Dumbledore smiled genially at the children in the Hall. "Now, as it is late, I will only say: the games begin tomorrow at nine in the morning, with Wyckham Academy against Aberclythe Institute. As such, off you all go, sleep peacefully, and let us enjoy the festivities tomorrow!"

The food on the House tables and on the Aberclythe and Wyckham tables disappeared. Professors and prefects were herding the Hogwarts students to their dormitories, and the Aberclythe and Wyckham professors were motioning for their students to join them.

Blake smiled at the Pirates Quidditch team and their friends, breathing in deeply and exhaling. "Well, we're off to bed now – Dumbledore has informed me that he's made a place for us in the East tower, near the Ravenclaw dorms." He nodded his head at Professor Flitwick, whom Harry recognized from Dumbledore's disastrous interview at Wyckham back in December. "Professor Flitwick will show us the portrait that will serve as our door to enter the room. The password for the next three days will be 'Sportsmanship.'"

The trek to the portrait and their rooms was uneventful, except for the meeting of the Grey Lady, the Ravenclaw ghost. Wyckham did not have any ghosts and seeing one – in the flesh, so to speak – was clearly startling.

The portrait was one of a studious young Englishman Lord surrounded by books. Blake clearly said, "Sportsmanship."

The man looked up, gave a smile and said, "Indeed, good sir!" as the portrait moved aside. The students wearily entered. Flitwick brought up the end, speaking with Flamel.

"The professors' rooms will be these two doors here," Flitwick squeaked, pointing to the right of the comfy common room, where two solid honey-coloured doors were. "Going up the stairwell on the right is the boys' dorms, and the left is the girls'. There is only one room for the girls, since there are only four of you. The boys have three rooms – I believe the older students can take the top two and the younger the other."

Harry didn't wait to hear anything else. He and Blaise trudged up the stairs with a feeble, "Goodnight," called back to the girls and professors. Oliver pointed at the first door they saw and said, "In boys," to which Harry and Blaise obeyed. Neville and Dean followed a bit more sedately.

Oliver then said briskly, "Six a.m. – be up and bright-eyed. Eat a good breakfast for seven and then change into your uniforms. Stay in the common room." He paused, watching Harry and Blaise pull the covers back from their four-poster beds. "Sleep tight, gents."

Harry yawned hugely, Neville laughing at him, and kicked his shoes off. He'd wake a bit earlier and pull out his uniform and enlarge his broom, doing morning stretches to ease his muscles for the game.

"Night everyone," said Harry, crawling under the covers. He did not change into his pajamas, or brush his teeth. He was far too tired.

Harry woke only once during the night, dreaming of Hogwarts' Defense against the Dark Arts Professor, Quirrell. He was wearing the man's turban and it was speaking to him, smelling horribly of garlic and rotten eggs. There was a flash of green and high-pitched laughter, causing Harry to wake with a start. Glancing at the bedside clock – which read only 3:45am – Harry decided to go back to sleep.

He forgot all about the dream.

June 5, 1992

June fifth dawned bright and clear in the hilly Scottish lands. Birds were chirping early in the morning and a hazy warmth crept up as the day progressed.

At seven in the morning, Harry, Blaise, Dean and Neville were eating a breakfast delivered to their common room by an exuberant house elf. Blaise and Harry were wearing their uniforms from yesterday; the ties dangling from their necks undone, their shirts and trousers rumpled and pushed half-way up their arms. Dean and Neville, on the other hand, wore ironed and pressed, clean uniforms, looking the every bit of the young gentlemen they were.

Hermione and Susan joined the boys shortly, forgoing their knee-socks for white ankle-socks instead, as the day was promising to be a comfortably warm one.

Angelina and Alicia, the girls said, were eating in the bedroom and getting dressed in their Quidditch uniforms.

Oliver, Fred and George had already come by and Adrian, Lee, Patrick and Allan decided to snooze in than come down.

"What's the strategy?" asked Harry to Oliver, who was muttering to himself and rummaging through various Quidditch plays. Slightly mused, the older teen glanced at his youngest team members and ran a hand through his short hair.

"Well," he began with his brogue thicker than usual. "We're against Aberclythe first. Let's not play our best and gage where their play level is. Our real competition will be against Hogwarts afterward."

"What?" cried Angelina. "Just play worse before and then kick it up? That doesn't make sense."

“Sure, it does,” agreed Allan, speaking to his girlfriend. “We get to see how well the other schools play, and then how they play against each other. We’ll know if they’re holding back or not. Of course, we can still beat them in every game played – we have the skill to do so... but it makes it much more enjoyable on the last day when we trounce them!”

Harry sighed, listening to his teammates argue. He privately agreed, but his role was small – if not the most important one. He could go for the Snitch as soon as possible, or wait.

“Harry,” said Oliver, breaking into his thoughts. “Take your time with the Snitch for today. We’ll catch up tomorrow and the last day if we need to.”

Nodding, Harry stood and went back into his room to change. He loved the Wyckham Quidditch uniforms; he thought they made him look quite dashing, like an 18th century army man.

A dark and deep royal blue sweater was pulled on over a tight white t-shirt, with the Wyckham emblem over his left upperarm. Lucky number 7 was etched onto the back, just below his name: POTTER.

His Quidditch trousers were a polyester and cotton mix, with shiny threads woven in to create a thicker jersey-like weave. They were black, tight and pencil-straight. He pulled out his heavy boots that were similar to combats, if only to protect players’ feet and toes. He buckled the appropriate straps and reached for his knee and elbow guards, just as Blaise walked in and proceeded to do the same.

Once all the guards were in place, Harry rolled up one sleeve of the sweater and strapped on his wand holster. He picked up his wand from his bedside table and pulled out his Nimbus, enlarged it, and slid the wand into the holster. With his right hand, Harry picked up the broom, nodded at Blaise and said, “I’ll wait downstairs.”

The rest of the team was there, anxiously pacing or tapping their feet on the floor. Flamel and Blake were conjuring Wyckham-coloured banners or flags for the spectators.

Once Blaise arrived, Oliver tersely said, “C’mon, let’s head down now.”

The team fell into formation, walking silently through the halls with their friends behind. The Quidditch Pitch was filled to the brim, including those who stood on the ground with binoculars.

Foreign dignitaries, politicians, Quidditch scouts and players found seats while the Hogwarts staff settled in their booth. The four House towers were stretched magically to accommodate the friends and families of the players and others who came to watch.

Aberclythe was given the Slytherin changing rooms and Wyckham the Ravenclaw ones; Hogwarts happily took over the Gryffindor changing room, but as they were not playing until later, the majority of the team was still back at the school getting ready.

Harry took his place beside Oliver, watching warily as he and Aberclythe’s Captain James Dubois shook hands and exchanged quick words.

Madam Hooch, the Hogwarts’ Quidditch referee and two other official Quidditch referees from the League would watch the game.

At Hooch’s whistle, both teams mounted their brooms and hovered in the air. At another blast of air, exactly at nine in the morning of June fifth, the Quaffle was thrown up while the other ref’s let the Bludgers and Snitch loose.

Immediately Oliver shot off to the Quidditch hoops – Angelina, Blaise and Alicia raced forward, swooped, and stole the Quaffle, tossing it back and forth. Fred and George were circling above the Chasers, watching out for Bludgers and whacking them hard towards Aberclythe’s players. Harry shot straight up, heading for the warm sun – but stopped a good three hundred feet above the ground.

His eyes scanned the field, and watched for near-fouls where he could interfere without penalty.

Oliver wanted the game to be like tennis – a back and forth kind of match, where they would gather as many points as they could and then have Harry steal the Snitch. Harry's job was to watch, follow and then get the Snitch.

By ten o'clock, Aberclythe had 150 points and Wyckham had 140. Angelina dived between the other two opposite team's Chasers and with a tactic Harry called "chicken" snatch the fumbled Quaffle, pulling up from the ground.

She tossed it backwards to Blaise, who held it in the crook of his arm and shot forward in a blast of air, past two Bludgers hell-bent on smashing into him. Alicia waved her hand and Blaise tossed it to her.

The three Chasers were in an inverted V formation, with Alicia holding the Quaffle while Blaise and Angelina cleared the path. They flew straight for the middle hoop where Aberclythe's Keeper waited.

At the last minute, the V shifted sideways and Alicia scored the Quaffle through the unguarded right hoop.

It was tied 150-150.

Harry made that his turning point and in a flash of gold near the opposite team's hoops, spotted the Snitch. He dove toward it recklessly.

He heard the crowd cheer and roar, surging to their feet for a better view; Harry concentrated solely on the now darting Snitch as it wove through a hoop. Harry caught up with the elusive gold piece, soared through the hoop, spiraled down around it and along the bottom of the pitch, his toes skimming the grass.

He lay almost flat against his broom, urging it to go faster, to catch up with the Snitch as it fluttered slightly in a zigzag pattern. Harry easily calculated where it would turn next, anticipated it, and cut the Snitch off, grabbing it gently in his cupped hand.

He held it up for the crowd to see, distantly hearing the announcer proclaim Wyckham to be the winner for round 1 by a total of 300 points.

Although Wyckham would be played Hogwarts that afternoon at two, the team went back to their common room after a group photograph (with Harry still clutching the Snitch) and brief words to the reporters. They were exhausted and ready to nap, which the majority of the team – minus Oliver Wood – did.

Hermione shook Harry and Blaise awake, telling them it was 12:30 and they ought to eat something for lunch before their game against Hogwarts which would undoubtedly be dirtier than Aberclythe's.

Once again, Oliver wanted to play slow and steady rather than high and fast. The Pirates were as good as their team name – they played, they teased, they manipulated and then pillaged the game.

Harry once again circled the pitch above everyone else, but this time had a shadow. Cho Chang was copying and following his every move. The twelve-year-old was on an old Cleansweep but had talent; else she wouldn't be on the team. However, that didn't stop Harry from feeling slightly annoyed at her blatant copycat manner.

Finally fed up, Harry went into a steep dive while the points were at Hogwarts 40 and Wyckham 70. He heard the announcer shout out, "And young Harry Potter has spotted the Snitch, going into a steep dive, with Miss Cho Chang following him!"

Grinning, as that was what he wanted, Harry noted that the Hogwarts players had stopped playing while the Wyckham Chasers used their inattention – or, rather, their attention that was fixed on Harry and Cho – to steal the Quaffle and score three more times before their Beaters realized what was happening.

Twenty feet from the ground, Harry narrowed his eyes and began to concentrate hard – he knew when he would have to pull up, but he didn't want to scare the witch off his tail either.

At ten feet, he corrected his plummet to a sloped dive, but it was still close to ninety degrees. Chang was gasping behind him, watching his face, but Harry's acting skills were admirable. He looked as though in deep concentration, focusing entirely on a Snitch that didn't exist.

At seven feet, he sharply leaned back and twisted his broom, angling himself onto his side and going into a sickening barrel spin. He avoided hitting the ground, corkscrewing up and right into the path of an oncoming Bludger. With a loop, he avoided the brown leather ball and shot toward Oliver, coming to a halt three feet from his captain, the Snitch in his hands.

Cho Chang, on the other hand, slammed painfully into the ground and was holding her wrist gingerly.

"I don't believe it!" shouted the announcer. "Harry Potter executes an extraordinary Wronski Feint and catches the Snitch, making Wyckham the winner at 220 points!"

Harry did feel bad though, and after the Wyckham team landed, Harry walked over to the medical tent and visited Cho Chang.

"Hey," he said, a bit embarrassed.

"Hi," the Asian girl replied, a bit tearfully as Madam Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse, fussed about her.

"I'm really sorry about the Wronski Feint," offered Harry, shuffling his feet. "I wouldn't have done it if you didn't seem so competent."

The girl blushed and smiled. "Thank you."

Harry grinned back. "I'll admit, all that tailing was pissing me off, but you showed a lot of courage following me that far. Most would pull out of that dive by twenty feet."

"Well," the girl began with an upward tilt of her chin, "I couldn't let the great Harry Potter get all the glory, could I? Besides," she added with a wicked grin, "I'll be hailed a hero for trying tonight at dinner."

Harry smiled. "Glad to hear that. Will you be able to compete against Aberclythe tonight?"

"Absolutely not!" snapped the nurse matron. "She won't be going anywhere until tomorrow morning. And only then will she be able to play!"

"I guess that answers it," sighed Cho. "Thanks for coming by, Harry Potter."

"No problem. I wanted to make sure you're okay," replied Harry again, before waving and leaving. Adrian complimented him on his sportsmanship while the twins ribbed him and asked if he had a crush. Harry ignored the twins and spoke in great lengths of the game to an excited Adrian, Blaise, Allan and Patrick. Dean just turned back to Quidditch through the Ages, hoping to understand the game better while Hermione and Susan growled about insane boys.

June 7, 1992

By the seventh, Wyckham was leading the Junior Quidditch League by 210 points over Hogwarts at a total of 960. Hogwarts was leading against Aberclythe, but barely, by a scant 60 points, which could toss the game either way in the final three.

Aberclythe against Wyckham at nine in the morning on the seventh finished quickly, as Harry spotted the Snitch hovering a foot away from him and nabbed it in less than three minutes since the game started.

Against Hogwarts was when Harry began to have the first inklings of worry. At the start of the game, he was pale and not his usual confident self, which had Oliver and Adrian sharing looks and his friends scanning the crowd.

Thirty minutes into the game against Hogwarts, Harry's broom bucked wildly like an untamed horse.

Gasping and grasping onto the thin piece of wood for dear life, Harry began to bemoan his decision to go five hundred feet above the ground for this game.

“William Shakespeare ate my socks!” he shouted as loudly as he could, hoping someone from his team would overhear. He also hoped to hell that Oliver and Adrian told the rest of the team and their friends about the ‘I need help’ phrase.

Harry was lightheaded and wheezy; immediately, though, he saw the Weasley twins soar over to him and watched as they peered up from ten feet below, circling and ready to catch him if he fell.

“Hang on Harry!” Fred shouted. “Just hold on as tightly as you can!”

“I’m bloody well doing that, Fred!” snarled back Harry, wrapping his legs around the broom as well, only to have it buck again, and drop five feet. Harry slipped and hung upside down, squeezing his eyes shut.

I’m going to have a phobia of heights after this, I’m sure, the preteen thought, biting a whimper off.

“Harry?” called George. “Let go, mate, we’ll catch you!”

“Not a blooming chance!” Harry shot back.

The broom bucked again, and finally, Harry opened his eyes, thought determinately, I don’t think so, Voldemort!, and used all of his upper body and abdominal strength to swing back right-side up on the broom.

He aimed the broom down and shot through the circle the twins made, heading for solid ground. If he was to fall off, he’d rather do it as close to solid earth as he could.

The broom continued to buck and writhe below Harry, but a white-knuckled grip and an ache in his thighs kept Harry holding on. A Bludger whizzed by him, a sharp edge to its thread catching his cheek and cutting it.

At thirty feet above ground, Harry totally lost control of the broom, which barrel-rolled and bucked at the same time, causing Harry to lose his grip entirely.

He fell off, flailing his arms slightly and opening his mouth to let out a startled, "Ah!"

Gasping, he tasted something metallic, gulped, and curled into a ball. When he felt the jarring impact of the ground, and felt a searing pain from his leg, Harry continued to roll using his shoulder and came to a halt on a sandy part of the pitch.

He stood, feeling a horrible acidic taste in his mouth and threw up onto the sand. His lunch came up, but so did a wet and sticky Golden Snitch, its wings unable to lift and fly itself away.

Harry wiped it off and handed it to a bewildered referee. "I caught the snitch," he said, and then fainted.

When Harry woke up, he learned that he only had a sprained ankle when Pomfrey checked him over. She gave him a healthy dose of Pepper Up potion, told him to relax and enjoy the celebratory dinner.

"Wyckham won the Junior Quidditch League, Mr. Potter," she said happily, "At 1260 points!"

Blaise was resting beside Harry's bed in a wooden chair, happily telling him the gory details of Hogwarts' brutal win over Aberclythe. Aberclythe suffered a lot of injuries and had already left the school, heading back to Wales to "lick their battle wounds."

Harry enjoyed the congratulations that the Hogwarts students offered to him as he and Blaise walked the dark corridors, heading to the Great Hall.

Hermione stood with her arms crossed outside the giant doors, tapping her foot impatiently.

"They're all waiting for the man of the hour, you know," she said snippily. "I can't believe you pulled that stunt, Harry! You could have gotten yourself killed!"

Harry smiled weakly and hugged a surprised Hermione. "Thank you for caring so much, Hermione."

The girl flushed and stammered, "Oh, well, yes, of course... but still..." She rolled her eyes. "Don't do that again, you dolt."

Harry grinned, releasing his best friend. "I'll try not to."

Blaise slapped him soundly on his shoulder and cheerfully said, "Well, Mr. Potter – I'll let you know that the Quidditch scouts that were here today are all agog with wonder, and are coming to Wyckham next year to watch all of our games! Isn't that a laugh?"

Sometime between the beginning of Blaise's dialogue and the end, Harry felt a hot, sharp pain hit his forehead, directly over his scar. Wincing and hissing out loud, Hermione touched Harry's arm gently and asked, "Harry...?"

Harry's fingers rose on their own accord, touching his scar. Blaise stopped talking and as Harry removed his sticky fingers, Blaise paled.

"Blood, you're bleeding Harry," the Italian breathed.

Harry looked at Blaise and Hermione steadily, his eyes dark and worried. "He's gone after the Stone."

"Harry...?" questioned Hermione slowly.

Harry looked at both Hermione and Blaise with soulful eyes and declared in a no-nonsense voice that had Hermione shivering and Blaise in awe of his power, "We need to stop Voldemort. Right now, before he gets the Stone. If you're not coming with me, I'm going alone."

Blaise and Hermione shared a look. Taking a deep breath, Blaise looked at Harry and said, "We're with you, Harry." He looked back at Hermione and finished, sounding older than eleven, "To the end."

AN: This was, by far, the hardest chapter to write. I hate Quidditch immensely (why the HELL did I add in the Junior Quidditch League? Oh, yeah, to show the dynamics between Hogwarts and Wyckham and their perceptions of each other.), and I was surprisingly busy this week with work and putting the finishing touches on my bedroom.

The restaurants that the Wyckham students eat at can be Google'ed and found in Manchester and Brighton; I have no idea where Hogwarts is, so I took a wild guess by looking at the pretty pictures of Scotland and decided. Trossachs is east of Oban, the area known as Lorn. Lorn and Trossachs are located in western Scotland, north-east of Argyll and Loch Lomond.

I think there will only be two more chapters before Wyckham Academy: Chamber of Secrets will begin, maybe less. Let's see how Voldemort and Harry handle their eventual meeting? Smiles

Chapter Seven

Harry turned on his heel, ready to head toward the third floor corridor, the one that was Forbidden (where else would you hide a magical artifact but in plain sight where you're told not to go?).

Hermione, the logical one, however, dug her heels in and grabbed Harry's arm before he could go more than a step.

"Wait just a minute, Harry," the busy-haired, buck-toothed girl said sharply. "You told all of us back at Wyckham that the Stone that Flamel gave Dumbledore is a diluted one, meaning it doesn't have its original full power."

"Yes..." agreed Harry slowly, wondering where this was going.

"So," continued Hermione, "if that is the case, why are you going after the Stone then? It's not powerful enough for Voldemort to achieve immortality."

"Let me ask you this..." hedged Harry, biting the inside of his cheek. "Would you rather have Voldemort back now, or would you rather have him back later?"

"Please speak English for the rest of us British, Harry," drawled Blaise with a roll of his eyes. "We don't speak in Harry-riddle."

Harry huffed and tried to explain. "Look, Voldemort didn't have a body left when he tried to kill me when I was a baby, right?"

At his friends' nods, he continued. "So... that means he's either hanging around Hogwarts as a ghost, which would be logical. Right? Okay... but he tried to break into Gringotts. Now, from what I can see, ghosts go right through walls. That means that Voldemort had a type of body... he's probably possessing someone else and using that body as a vessel for his dirty work."

Blaise nodded, following along. "Right, so you want to stop Voldemort from getting the diluted Stone because if he got it, he could still 'come back.'"

“Er...” Harry frowned. “Technically. The original Philosopher’s Stone has the power to give its drinker immortality, as long as they continue to drink it, right?”

“Right,” agreed Hermione. “So, you’re going under the theory that a diluted Philosopher’s Stone will give Voldemort his body back, but even if he continued to drink it, he wouldn’t achieve immortality.”

“That’s what I’m guessing. You’re the brain here, Hermione,” stated Harry with a smug, don’t-you-know-it tone. Blaise scowled.

“What about me? I’m just as good as Hermione! I could have come up with that if she wasn’t talking!”

Hermione rolled her eyes and patted Blaise sympathetically on the shoulder. “It’s okay, being second best. You’ll get used to it. I promise.”

Blaise’s scowl turned dark and he began to brood, his arms crossed. “So are we going after this bloody thing, or not?”

Harry nodded.

“Do you want the rest of us to come along? I highly doubt it’ll be difficult to shout ‘William Shakespeare ate my socks!’ into the Great Hall,” offered Hermione tentatively.

“I’d rather not get anyone hurt,” said Harry slowly.

“Oh, but we don’t count in that?” scoffed Blaise. Harry glared at his best friend.

“Come on, Blaise,” began Harry, in a slightly hurt tone. He was, however, feeling slightly annoyed at Blaise’s sudden snarls. Vaguely, he realized it hadn’t started until Hermione dismissed Blaise’s intelligence.

Blaise sighed and ran a hand through his curls. "Fine... fine, I'm acting like a prat. I'm sorry." He looked at both his friends. "I'm really sorry."

"I'd rather not hear apologies when I do want to stop Voldemort, but later would suffice," grinned Harry. Blaise sighed again and Hermione huffed.

"Now... don't get mad at me, Harry," she began, "But why do you feel as though you have to go after the Stone in the first place?"

Harry shrugged, staring off at the gray stone of the wall. "I dunno, really, Hermione." His lips quirked into a semi-smile and Harry turned to face her. "I think it's this feeling, deep down inside of me, letting me know that I ought to do something because Voldemort was around before and no one did do anything then. My parents are dead because of him. I think there's a part of me that wants to face him and ask 'why,' a part of me that wants revenge."

"Revenge won't bring your parents back, Harry," said Hermione in a small voice.

Harry shuddered slightly. "I know. But that doesn't mean I won't feel better if I tell Voldemort to sod off."

Turning on his heel, without Hermione stopping him, Harry finally began walking to the wide staircase that led to the third-floor corridor. "You're coming, right?" he called down to his friends. They were steps behind him after that.

There was only one door along the whole corridor on the third floor, slightly open and dark.

A faint tune was floating along the air, growing louder as they walked closer. The three shared edgy glances, but shrugged and pushed the heavy wooden door open a bit wider, cringing as it squeaked.

A snort was heard and all three immediately pulled out their wands, mentally going over what spells they could use.

Harry completely blanked, though, when he saw the gigantic three-headed dog that was snoring. An abandoned harp stood off to one corner, charmed to play a tune for an indefinite amount of time.

Bringing a finger to his lips, Harry motioned to the dog's paw. There, slightly visible, was a rounded door hinge. The dog was guarding the entrance to where the Philosopher's Stone was kept.

As one, the three lifted the paw and set it down gently a few feet away from where it had been. Harry lifted the trap door and they gazed down into inky blackness stoically. Warily, Harry whispered "lumos," but they could still not see the bottom.

"After you," Blaise whispered across to Hermione cheekily. "Ladies first."

Huffing, Hermione readied herself for the drop when a large fist-sized chunk of goop landed between Hermione and Harry.

Disgusted, Hermione looked up only to see the three-headed dog now growling at them furiously.

Harry panicked, glancing at Blaise and Hermione in horror as the dog emitted a loud growl and a horrible stench.

"The last, the dreaded hour is come / that bears my love from me: I hear the dead note of the drum, I mark the fatal tree. The bell has toll'd; it shakes my heart; The trumpet speaks thy name: And must my Gilderoy depart, To bear a death of shame!" sang Hermione softly, drawing the dog's attention to her.

She motioned frantically for Harry and Blaise to start singing along. The dog's many eyes began to droop again and its head began to nod away.

"That's just somber, Hermione, and I don't know what it is," Blaise finally said, as Hermione finished with the last notes.

The dog snuffed, and Harry began singing the first rhyme that came to his mind. "London Bridge's falling down, falling down, falling down. London Bridge's falling down, my fair lady..."

Blaise and Hermione hurriedly joined in, "Build it up with iron bars, iron bars, iron bars. Build it up with iron bars, my fair lady!"

Hermione jumped first, leaving Harry and Blaise to sing to the slightly snoring animal.

"Iron bars will bend and break. Bend and break, bend and break. Iron bars will bend and break, my fair lady!"

Blaise jumped, leaving Harry alone. He vaguely wondered if that was the end for him as the dog snuffled some more, but he settled and Harry sang the last part softly before jumping after his friends.

"Build it up with needles and pins, needles and pins, needles and pins. Build it up with needles and pins, my fair lady..."

Harry landed on something warm and soft, something cushy.

"So, what is this?" Harry asked, looking around. Hermione sat two feet away, and Blaise was nearly beside him.

"Dunno," the Italian offered. "But it's damn lucky it was here to break our fall, else it would've hurt a whole lot."

"I don't think it was luck," said Hermione quickly, breathing heavily. "Those are vines that are wrapping around you!"

"What?" asked Harry dumbly, looking down to watch as a thick green vine had wound itself around his legs and was keeping him in place.

"Oh, merda," moaned Blaise, who began wiggling in place. The vines just tightened around him in response.

"Stop!" commanded Hermione. "Just stop! I think I've read about this."

“Yeah?” snarled Blaise, glaring at the witch. “If you have, so had I, because we’ve been in the library together nearly every night studying!”

“Oy!” complained Harry, moving his head side to side to avoid a particularly adamant vine that wanted his glasses, “I was with both of you, so shut up and let Hermione think about what this thing is.” He paused to duck another curling vine end. “Preferably soon before it takes my glasses, please and thank you.”

“I’ve got it!” crowed Hermione, “We’re sitting on Devil’s Snare.”

“It doesn’t like sunlight,” injected Blaise glumly. “The more its prey moves, the tighter it gets until it suffocates its prey.”

Harry grimaced. “Mm, tasty.”

“So... sit still. And someone light a fire,” ordered Blaise.

“But we haven’t any matches!” complained Hermione. Blaise glared at her.

“Are you a witch or not, Hermione? Use your wand.”

“Shut your eyes!”

Harry slammed his eyes shut with seconds to spare. Hermione had shouted “Lumos Maxima!” and a bright light enveloped the chamber they were in. The vines around Harry’s legs, arms, torso and neck disappeared quickly, and so did the ones under his bum. He fell through the Devil’s Snare and landed on uneven stone, bruising his bum in the process.

Hermione and Blaise fell seconds after him, rubbing their knees or sore body parts.

“Where exactly did you read about Devil’s Snare?” asked Harry to them. “We don’t take herbology until third year, and even then it’s an elective.”

Hermione shrugged. "It was referenced in a defense book I was reading so I cross-referenced it to the herbology section."

Blaise grunted, rubbing his knee. "Like she said."

Rolling his eyes, Harry only suggested that they should move on, walking down a steeply sloped path to the dungeon-styled door that was at the far end of the damp chamber they were in now.

They entered another room, this one filled with buzzing birds. "Oh, great. Bird-watching," muttered Harry. "Uncle Vernon is dedicated to that hobby."

"They aren't birds," said Blaise suddenly. "They're winged keys!"

Hermione looked queasily at the old and twig-less brooms stacked at the edge of the wall.

"I get it," smiled Harry. "We fly the broom, find the key that matches the lock and stick it in."

"Kind of... easy isn't it?" hedged Hermione. She glanced at the iron lock and knob, and the hundreds of flying keys. "Something doesn't seem right... especially if a task like this is one of the few things guarding the Stone."

Harry hummed his agreement. "Blaise? What do you think?"

Blaise rubbed his chin thoughtfully and murmured, "I think something will happen when we go for the broom. Those keys are flying slowly and sedately. They won't want to be caught, making this harder for anyone wanting the Stone. I say they'll scatter."

"I'll take a broom," offered Harry.

"So will I," agreed Blaise. Hermione huffed and crossed her arms.

"And I'll wait until you herd the key and insert it into the lock," she answered with a roll of her eyes and a huff of, "boys."

Blaise flashed Hermione a smile and grabbed the nearest broom's handle with a tight grip. The second he did, the keys flying above them seemed to hum with energy and vibrated more than they had while leisurely flying about.

"I have a very bad feeling about this," murmured Harry softly, also reaching for a broom.

Hermione interrupted, stating, "You're looking for a larger key, one that might look a bit old, silver to match the lock. It'll probably have a bent or broken wing if You-Know-Who... er... V-V-Voldemort has already been through here."

Harry and Blaise nodded, looked at each other, and took a deep breath.

"Ready, mate?" asked Blaise slowly.

Harry nodded back. "Ready."

Together, they slowly rose on rusty, old brooms. As soon as they were half-way to the ceiling, the keys shot off together in one direction, like a flock of birds. Sensing predators, they bombarded the two preteens, cutting them.

"Keep your eyes out, Harry!" shouted Blaise. "I'll distract them; you use your Seeker skills to find that key!"

With that said, Blaise shot off through the middle of the swarm of keys, making the majority of them follow him as he did a series of loops, dives and corkscrew turns.

Harry flew higher, trying to get into a Quidditch mind frame. It shouldn't have been hard, considering the League had just finished barely four hours ago.

After what seemed like hours – but was in reality only seconds – Harry spotted a winged key that didn't fly as straight as the others, and lagged behind. It was made of iron, old-looking, and larger than the other smaller, shinier keys.

That's it! Thought Harry, racing toward it. The key made an effort to escape Harry's nimble fingers but failed, and soon Harry had it cradled against his chest, soaring down to where Hermione waited.

Blaise, on the other hand, did his best to head toward the two while keeping the swarm of keys away.

Hermione slid the key into the lock (it fit perfectly), and turned the doorknob. "Come on, Blaise!" she and Harry shouted together. Harry and Hermione wrenched the door wide open with their combined weight, leaving a space free so Blaise could get into the next chamber.

Harry had discarded the broomstick earlier, and Blaise attempted to do the same but by flying with the broom straight into the wooden door opposite the open one. He slammed hard against the brickwork, and fell to the ground with a blossoming bruise on his head but a wide grin.

Hermione and Harry slammed the door shut seconds after Blaise flew through to avoid the onslaught of rabid keys. They could hear the thunkthunkthunk of the keys as they embedded themselves into the door. They walked through the next door, as they were only in an antechamber, and stopped abruptly.

"It's very dark in here," commented Hermione in a soft voice. It was slightly wobbly; Harry thought that they would soon be over their heads.

As soon as she spoke, torches flared up around the chamber, including an elaborate, hanging candelabra above a large, raised checkered platform.

Oddly shaped and broken rocks were discarded on either side of the platform, looking like what once were armoured men. Blaise ran his hand down one and peered at its disfigured face.

"It's a bishop," he exclaimed quietly. He glanced around and whistled. "And this is a giant chess board. We'd have to play across."

Harry exchanged looks with Hermione. Neither were good chess players.

“Can you play chess well, Blaise?” asked Harry slowly.

Blaise flushed pink and shook his head. “No. Can either of you?”

The two shook their heads as well.

Hermione sighed. “Now what do we do?”

“Well,” began Blaise hesitantly, “If we were any good at chess, we’d play our way across the board... but since we aren’t...”

“Maybe we could levitate each other over the board? Or maybe even walk our way around where all the discarded pieces are?” suggested Hermione. “I mean, it’s completely silly to think those would work, but... what other choice do we have?”

“I’ll go first. That way, if something happens, you and Harry can play against the pieces and still make it to tea with Voldemort,” offered Blaise with a smirk. “We’ll try walking around first.”

With his friends’ acceptance, Blaise began to carefully pick his way between the discarded chess pieces and sometimes climbing over them. He did his best to avoid stepping on the board.

However, half-way down the side of the board, two black knights pointed their spears at him and made him stop.

“Er...”

The knights advanced and Blaise scrambled back over the same pieces that were slowly coming alive. One tripped him and another pawn raised a stone hand to hit him, but Harry shouted as loudly as he could, “Accio Blaise!”

The dark, curly-haired Italian soared through the air and landed on his bum in front of Harry and Hermione. The chess pieces were shaking themselves off and slowly lumbering toward the trio.

“Levitation,” they all agreed on at once. “Hermione will go first.”

The girl paled but agreed. With both Blaise and Harry concentrating, they pointed their wands at Hermione and said clearly, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

Hermione rose in the air – ten feet, twenty, and finally thirty – yelling at the two to get on with it and that she wanted ground beneath her feet. Really, she did.

Harry used a light wind charm to make Hermione float toward the other end of the chamber – a horribly long length of a yard – but she managed to arrive safely, if only a sprained ankle for landing on her foot wrong when the boys canceled the charms.

“You next, Blaise,” said Harry quietly. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see the rock pieces had reached the edge of the chess board’s sides and were moving toward the two.

Blaise was quicker, with Harry levitating him and Hermione accio’ing him to her. As soon as he landed, their wands were out and ready to help Harry – only he was busy blasting away homicidal chess pieces.

“Reducto!” He shouted at a rook, watching as it blew apart from its middle, collapsing in pieces. “Reducto! Reducto!”

A severed hand from a queen began to crawl to Harry. Slightly horrified, Harry wondered how Headmistress Hartz would write his relatives about his death. Your nephew was strangled to death by a severed rock hand while attempting to save the world. So sorry.

With a jerk, he found himself hovering twenty feet above the rock carnage, and another jerk around his naval had him soaring through the air.

The levitation charm disappeared and he began a diving descent, but landed on bent knees.

The chess pieces were shaking in anger and the knights, bishops and pawns were ready for their blood.

“You know,” began Hermione unsteadily, “That we had the broom from the other chamber right? Blaise left it at the foot of the door when we passed through. We could have used that to fly across.”

Harry groaned and Blaise flushed red, muttering in Italian.

“Let’s get out of here,” suggested Harry finally, watching the heavy pieces trying to run across the board.

The others agreed and they ran through the wood door and slammed it shut.

“Ew,” said Blaise suddenly, wrinkling his nose in disgust, “What’s the smell?”

The trio turned in quick surprise with their wands out, only to see a mountain troll (they had covered those at the beginning of the year with Kingsley Shacklebolt) unconscious on the stone floor. It reeked something awful, so the three wasted no time in opening the next door and shutting it firmly behind them.

Harry even opted to throw some locking charms at the door, but decided against it. It wasn’t as though once the troll woke up it would charge through the door and past each new obstacle.

The other two agreed readily, passing through another heavy door and onto a smooth dais. Once the door slammed shut behind them, a purple flame roared to life, licking the ceiling.

A black flame appeared between them and the next door.

Harry wiped his forehead and rubbed his temples. “I’m beginning to think that Voldemort can have the bloody Stone if there is any more after this.”

In the middle of the dais was a wood table with seven bottles and a piece of parchment. Hermione walked over and read the paper.

"It's a puzzle," she said, looking at her friends. "Listen: Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind; Two of us will help you, whichever you would find; One among us seven will let you move ahead; Another will transport the drinker back instead; Two among our number hold only nettle wine, three of us are killers, waiting hidden in line. Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore; to help you in your choice, we give you these clues four: First, however slyly the poison tries to hide, you will always find some on nettle wine's left side. Second, different are those who stand at either end, but if you move onwards, neither is your friend. Third, as you see clearly, all are different size; neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides. Fourth, the second left and second on the right are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight."

"Oh, wonderful," moaned Blaise. "Riddles. Scores and scores of clues hidden in riddles of roundabout phrases and cleverly hidden words."

"Give me a minute," snapped Hermione, "I can do this."

Harry didn't say anything, ignoring Blaise who still muttered and crossed his arms.

"Right," Hermione stated finally. "Two are poisons – those – and those two are wine. The round bottle at the far left will take us back, and that smallest one will bring us forward."

"There's not enough for all of us to move forward. It's barely a swallow," commented Blaise quietly. He gave a wobbly smile. "Guess Voldemort is a greedy bloke."

The three were silent, contemplating their options. "Is there any way to maybe dilute it so that we can mix it with the wine to go through together?" Harry finally asked. "Flamel usually says that it's possible with water or another liquid base."

"I don't think we're meant to go further, Harry," explained Hermione softly. She touched Harry's shoulder and gave him a tight hug.

"Hey!" exclaimed Harry, touched. "What's all this?"

"You're a great wizard, you know that, Harry?" Hermione said, her voice slightly muffled in his shoulder. Blaise watched on.

"Jesus, Hermione," laughed Harry slightly, "Not as great as you or Blaise are."

"Me! Books! And cleverness!" warbled Hermione. "There are more important things – friendship and bravery – oh, Harry. Please be careful."

"Hey," he said, patting her on the back, "Hey, now. Of course I will be careful. I've fought Voldemort before, haven't I? And I came out victor in that... I've got luck on my side!"

"She's right, Harry," rumbled Blaise. "Be careful, eh? Ten years is enough time for Voldemort to fester hate at you. He could have something entirely different up his sleeves now."

"I know." Harry peered at Blaise over Hermione's head. He detangled the bushy-haired girl from his body and passed her to Blaise. "Drink it and go back. Try to blast some chess pieces for me too, okay? And get Flamel. Blake, even Dumbledore. Anyone."

Blaise nodded, Hermione hiccupping at his side. They both swallowed an equal amount of what was left and shuddered visibly. As Blaise passed Harry, he squeezed his shoulder.

"See you on the other side, mate," he whispered, and disappeared through the fire.

Harry took a deep breath, swallowed the last bit of the other potion to get him through the black fire and murmured, "Ready or not, Voldemort, here I come."

There was a man Harry had never spoken to before in front of a large decorated mirror. Harry vaguely recognized him as Professor Quirrell, the Defense professor at Hogwarts.

"Hello Professor," Harry said evenly, walking down the steep steps that led to the floor where the man stood.

The man in question spun on his heel quickly, face contorted in anger. "Potter!"

"Professor," replied Harry. "Fancy seeing you down here. I had expected Voldemort, not some ambitious professor."

"The Dark Lord?" laughed the man. "Why Potter, surely you didn't fight your way down here just to save the Stone from an ambitious man! Let me tell you a little secret: your expectations are correct as well."

"Oh?" Harry raised a single eyebrow. "I don't see Voldemort around here."

The man laughed again. "He sees you, boy."

"Slightly creepy, thanks, I always wanted to know," answered Harry, slightly amused. The man didn't have the Stone; he was trying to annoy Harry, and Voldemort wasn't here. It seemed like the whole thing was a waste of time now.

"So..." Harry rocked back on his heels. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for the Stone," the man replied solicitously.

"Ah." Harry read the words above the mirror on its mantle. Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi. Yet another riddle. "What do the words mean?" he asked, pointing.

The man seemed amused and replied easily enough. "It's backwards. 'I show not your face but your hearts desire.'"

“So... what’s the point of having a mirror that doesn’t work?” asked Harry, stumped. He was beginning to toy with Quirrell. The longer he annoyed him, the better chance that Flamel or Dumbledore would come and save the day. Harry wasn’t feeling up to another good deed chalked up to his ‘Boy-Who-Lived’ status.

“The point is that it shows me presenting the Philosopher’s Stone to my master and him praising me for my good work. The Stone is here – somewhere – and I must have it!”

The man is seriously deranged, thought Harry, but that amusement slowly faded away to horror as he heard a disembodied voice snarl, “Use the boy.”

“What?” he squeaked, stepping backwards as Quirrell whirled around with an outstretched hand.

Harry was magically paralyzed and Quirrell was snarling, “Come here, boy!”

Unbidden, Harry felt his feet shuffle toward, feeling like lead, until he was about a foot away from Quirrell and wrinkling his nose up at the garlic-y stench he was giving off.

“What do you see?” barked out the thin, turban-wearing man.

Stuttering, and doing some fast thinking, Harry began haltingly, “I see... myself.” He glanced quickly at Quirrell and then back away with the man’s beady eyes on him. “I see myself winning the Junior Quidditch League... and I’m seventeen... I’m at the top of my class – everyone loves me. I’m the most popular guy at Wyckham....” Quirrell was looking at the mirror and not him now.

Harry was good at lying; he had to be. The Dursleys hated him and he disliked them back with equal intensity which caused him to take the blame for many things that weren’t his fault. At home, he was punished. At school, he was able to weasel his way out of punishments because he could lie so well. It became a game to him: to see how well he could lie and get out of something sticky, while keeping his thoughts inward and not showing on his face.

At this time, while he was coming up with a lie to feed Voldemort and Quirrell, Harry watched his lithe eleven-year-old body in the mirror. To him, the mirror was exactly what it was suppose to be: a mirror. He saw only his reflection until the mirror Harry winked at him, putting his hand in his pocket and pulling out a ruby red, unshaped stone.

Inwardly gaping while outwardly showing coldness, Harry continued his running dialogue of how famous he'd be, how he'd be a great Minister of Magic, ruling the magical world. His mirror self put the Stone back into his pocket where Harry felt a bulge appear in his pants.

Ingenious.

As he spoke, rambling on and on about all his future great deeds, Quirrell scoffed and finally dismissed him, allowing Harry to slowly step backwards. He was half-way up the stone steps when Voldemort hissed out, "The boy has the Stone! Get the boy!"

Mentally groaning – I was so close! – Harry tensed and was ready to fling himself to the floor in whichever direction he needed to go.

Quirrell flew at him, hands outstretched and a snarl on his face. Harry yelped and stumbled on his feet back, using gravity and his body weight to land to Quirrell's left and on the floor.

The possessed man turned on his heel and came at Harry again. Harry remained on the floor, grabbing Quirrell's hands as he leaned down and reached for his throat. The arid scent of blistering flesh and smoke filled a surprised Harry's nostrils; Quirrell screamed in raw pain and sat back on his haunches as Harry crawled away.

"Master, master," he moaned pitifully, "My hands, they are burnt!"

"Get the boy! Kill him!" the ever-so-worried Voldemort commanded, ignoring Quirrell's pain.

Quirrell stood again, racing toward Harry. Not waiting for Quirrell to take him by surprise again, Harry's leg lashed out at Quirrell's

kneecap. The man howled and jumped back and Harry stood defiantly.

Quirrell glared at Harry, hatefully, and whipped his wand out from the hidden pockets of his cloak.

Uh, oh, thought Harry, gulping. His wand was strapped to his arm, but he did not want to use it – what could he possibly use against Voldemort, of all people? Even with Voldemort possessing a (arguably) sane and capable wizard much older than Harry?

“Reducto!” shouted Quirrell suddenly. Harry dove behind a stone pillar and sank to his knees, his arms over his head; he was hit by flying debris. The spell blasted a chunk of stone from the pillar, making it wobble and screech as the granite tried to realign itself.

Breathing heavily, Harry ran and rolled behind another pillar, listening to Quirrell taunt him to come out, and Voldemort hissing how much he wanted the Stone. The possessed man had shot several other spells at the pillars that Harry hid behind, causing most to teeter precariously or crumble away altogether.

Finally, the game turned.

“Hiding? What a coward you are, Harry Potter,” hissed Voldemort menacingly. “Your father had the courage to stand and face me before he died... as did your mother. She begged me to take her, kill her instead... save you. Just give me the Stone and you can see your parents again.”

“Yeah, in the afterlife, I’m not that stupid,” yelled back Harry, running and diving behind the first ruined pillar.

Harry knew he couldn’t keep this up; sooner or later he would have to face Quirrell and Voldemort, although he wished to put it off for as long as he could. It wasn’t that he was a coward; rather it was that Harry wished to prolong his life as long as he could. He considered himself a self-preservationist, a boy who knew when to stay and fight and when to retreat.

Then again, he probably had a healthy (or unhealthy, depending on the lifespan) dose of heroicism in him, which caused his crusade to save a fake Philosopher's Stone in the first place.

"Fine," he suddenly shouted back. "Fine! You can have the damn Stone. See if I care!"

He could almost feel the pleasure and smugness that rolled off Quirrell, coming from Voldemort.

Harry stood and walked calmly to the Dark Lord's minion, his hand tightly grasping the Stone in his pocket.

"You want it?" Harry asked with a smirk on his face, "Go and get it." Without looking, Harry threw the Stone into the black fire that surrounded the mirror and floor.

Quirrell let out a tiny screech of outrage, turning back to Harry. "You will pay for that."

"Whatever," dismissed Harry. "It was a fake anyway."

Quirrell paused. "What?"

"Pardon me, you mean," muttered Harry before saying louder, "It was a fake. Flamel knew you'd be after the Stone, and Dumbledore wanted it, so he made a fake. Flamel doesn't trust Dumbledore all that much, see?"

Quirrell shook in rage, his hands trembling furiously while Voldemort hissed loudly in the quiet room, "You lie! YOU LIE!"

Quirrell raced at Harry again, but the eleven year old was ready. Harry stretched out his arms and tightly clasped his hands on the man's face, ignoring the retch-worthy stench as the skin broke and fell away from his face in chunks.

The hissing continued, with Quirrell moaning desperately beneath Harry's hands, but the preteen moved them to cover his entire face and then his throat, coughing and his eyes tearing up.

Finally, Harry stepped back and watched as Quirrell fell to the floor, moaning piteously and shuddering, his body turning to brown-gray ash as something unnatural covered and ran down the length of his body, burning him alive.

Exhausted, Harry slumped against a fallen pillar, yawning and telling himself, I'll only rest my eyes for a little bit...

AN: "Guilderoy" is a traditional English song (or, supposedly) that I Google'd. I wanted something a bit more somber at the beginning, before doing a nursery rhyme; I figured "London Bridge's" was apt enough.

PS: I know full well that "self-preservationalist" and "heroicism" are not real words, but they suit and fit the thought process of Harry's.

PPS: I have also decided that Wyckham Academy will be the title for the entire series, and there will be no breaks – ergo, the entire seven (possibly eight) years of Harry's schooling will continue in one go, no "book breaks." There will be a different title when Chamber of Secrets begins, where Philosopher's Stone is, but otherwise everything will be under the Wyckham Academy series title.

Chapter Eight

Everything was white. White, white, white, white. Harry didn't like white much, as he found out, because the white walls, ceiling and drapery belonged to Hogwarts' Infirmary. At least at Wyckham there were some nice cherry-coloured furniture and comfortable looking armchairs for patients to sit in.

Groaning, Harry turned his head, opened his eyes and reached blindly for his glasses.

"Here, Harry," said a male voice.

His glasses were passed to him and Harry placed them on the bridge of his nose, blinking owlshly at Matthew Blake.

"Professor...?" asked Harry hoarsely.

Blake handed him a glass of water. "Drink it slowly..." When Harry did as he asked, Blake continued. "We were really worried about you, Harry."

"Why?" croaked the preteen, throat still sore for screaming spells earlier. "What happened? All I remember is Voldemort and Quirrell..."

"Who is dead," said Flamel, stepping closer to Harry's bed – he had been in the shadows of the dusky evening. The older man paused. "Well, not Voldemort, but Quirrell certainly is. Nothing left of him but ashes."

"I hope his will stated that he wanted to be cremated," snorted Blaise, stepping out from behind Flamel.

"Zabini!" snapped Flamel, turning his head quickly at the young boy.

"Sorry," he muttered back, head bowed.

Harry sighed. "What happened?"

Blake twisted his fingers together and began, quietly, to explain. "When you failed to show up for the dinner, Oliver Wood and Adrian Pucey sounded the alarm. Unfortunately, Dumbledore received an urgent owl stating he was needed at the Ministry and left... Blaise and Hermione found me and Flamel searching the school for you lot. They explained what happened, where you were, and that was when we realized Quirrell was gone.

"Flamel blasted away every obstacle when we entered the trap door with the Hogwarts professors: McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick and Sprout."

Harry sent a grateful nod to Flamel. The older man picked up on the dialogue. "When we found you, Quirrell's body was ash and you were lying against a broken pillar. You barely had a pulse, so we rushed you up here to Madam Pomfrey's care." Flamel stroked his white beard and sighed. "As for my Stone... when you threw it in the fire, it melted it. I suppose it'll still work..." he muttered, "technically," and then spoke louder, "but I'll chat with Albus and have it destroyed. Of course..."

Flamel winked.

"He doesn't know I still have my original copy with me, so... we'll just pretend, shall we?"

Harry took a sip of his water, contemplative.

"Er, well, you see..." Harry hedged. "I kinda told Voldemort it was a fake Stone..."

Flamel shrugged. "Okay, so he knows that I have a working one – big deal."

Big deal? Thought Harry, shocked.

Flamel continued, "There are a lot of enchantments and wards surrounding my Stone, and I think Voldemort might move on to greener pastures. After all, the fake one was a bit difficult to get – posing as a teacher, passing the watchful eyes of the Headmaster

and Snape, going down and figuring out how to get past each obstacle...”

“Sir...?” questioned Harry, his mouth open.

“Don’t worry too much about it, Mr. Potter,” said Blake, running a hand through his brown hair. “I won’t say that Flamel and I were happy about you and your friends doing what you did... but I’m sure Anita – Headmistress Hartz – will tell you all about that when we get back to Wyckham.”

So, everything was fine. Sort of. Harry almost died, but the world was safe for just a little while longer.

“Why does Voldemort want to kill Harry, Professors?” asked Blaise suddenly. “You found out that it was Quirrell who was jinxing Harry’s broom during that game of Quidditch and that Voldemort possessed the man... so why go after Harry specifically?”

“Because I’m the Boy-Who-Lived?” replied Harry cheekily.

Flamel and Blake shared a look, and Blake hesitantly began, “I think you’ll meet with the Headmistress when we return, Harry.”

Harry wasn’t sure whether it was because he did something really stupid (yet heroic), or because Hartz would tell him why Voldemort wanted to kill him. All he remembered from her was that Voldemort was only scared of Dumbledore.

“Well,” said Flamel, patting Harry on his knee. “It seems that what happened down in the passages is known to the entire school, and all the Wyckham students who will, no doubt, tell all their friends when we return to the school tomorrow morning.”

“But, we need to go now and inform Anita of what’s happened. She was frantic on the Floo this evening,” said an amused Blake.

“It was probably because she hates the Floo Network,” laughed Flamel, standing and walking away with Blake. They passed through the Infirmary’s double doors.

“Well, would you like sticking your head in a burning inferno?”

Harry turned to Blaise, slightly surprised to see his friend looking so serious. “What’s the matter?”

“You could’ve died, you prat!” snapped Blaise, slugging Harry on his shoulder.

The preteen rubbed at it. “Ow...”

“Hermione and I were in a right snit – not to mention the rest of the Pirates and their friends! We ought to have told one of the Professors, but you had to play hero!” Blaise continued to rant.

“I didn’t mean to!”

“Well, yeah, it’s done and over with now,” snarled Blaise, sitting on Harry’s bed and crossing his arms. Harry took Blaise’s seat position to be a good sign. If he were truly angry, he wouldn’t have sat on the bed.

“So...” Harry began slowly. “Now what?”

“We missed the League’s celebratory dinner, but since it’s only eight, we can head down to the Great Hall for the presentation of the Junior Quidditch League Cup to Wyckham,” offered Blaise slyly, “And have a group picture with the press, and listen to Hogwarts give out the Quidditch and House Cup.”

“So I’m allowed out?” brightened Harry, throwing back his covers.

Blaise laughed. “Yeah... you took a few hard knocks to your head, but Pomfrey had to listen to Healer McMillan and Dr. Yamen, since they’re your physicians. Okay, so you almost died... but apparently according to Healer McMillan you bounced back really well...”

Harry inwardly cheered and wobbled out of bed, searching for his shoes and clothes. "Blaise... where is my uniform? And why don't I have any boxers on?"

Harry and Blaise stumbled into the Great Hall, laughing uproariously at a stunt Peeves the Poltergeist (everyone knew who he was and how to stay away from him) had done to the rude caretaker's cat, Mrs. Norris.

Blaise led the still fatigued Harry Potter to the Wyckham table, where Hermione gave Harry a tight hug and the Weasley twins congratulated him on an incredibly stupid stunt.

Oliver sat on his left, while Blaise took his right seat, making sure Harry was blocked by curious Hogwarts students, looking for conversation.

"Ah, yes," began Dumbledore in a loud, clear voice that carried over the noise of the Great Hall, subduing many students until there was silence.

"Let me begin by saying thank you to Mr. Potter, Mr. Zabini and Ms. Granger for stopping Voldemort" – gasps of shock and fear lifted the silence – "earlier this evening. For that, I commend the three of you.

"I would also like to present Wyckham's Quidditch team with the first ever Junior Quidditch League Cup. Your school, the year, and the team members' names have been engraved on the plaque. Would you all please come up here and receive the Cup?"

Oliver stood first, as Captain, and the rest of the team followed sedately, but smiling brightly. With Flamel and Blake just off to the Head Table, the Pirates Quidditch team and the two professors posed for the remaining reporters while they snapped pictures. Those reporters soon left, eager to write up their headlines and to tie in Harry's amazing defeat of Voldemort, for a second time.

Harry was sure Voldemort wouldn't like that.

The team sat back down, clapping politely as well.

“Without further ado, I would also like to say that the House and Quidditch Cup both go to Slytherin this year!” continued Dumbledore happily, clapping once. Harry watched in awe – he would never admit it though – as the banners hanging above the tables changed colour to reflect the Slytherin house’s green and silver.

The students of Hogwarts clapped politely, but the Slytherins’ cheered loudly. They reveled in the glory of their house and Harry found it slightly pathetic and disgusting.

“One final thing: the Great Hall will be open until curfew – ten o’clock – tonight so that the students may mingle and speak to one another, especially from Wyckham,” continued Dumbledore.

Blake had a spasm in his seat and Flamel raised a hairy eyebrow at Dumbledore. Harry cringed.

“Have a good night!” the eccentric man finished.

Immediately, people began flooding the Wyckham table, all wanting to know about the adventure Harry had.

Harry blushed and tried to stammer out a few answers, but it proved to be too much; all he wanted was to go back to sleep.

“Merlin, Wood, Pucey,” drawled a louder, male voice from around them, “Who would have ever thought that you two would go to a Muggle-lovers school like Wyckham?”

Oliver tensed and Adrian shot a look at a tall, dark-looking teenager from Slytherin. “Shut it, Bole. No one asked for your biased opinion.”

“Oh, they’re teaching you big words now,” sneered another teen, wearing a Slytherin tie and jacket. “Think you’re all special because you attend a Muggle school?”

“Actually, it’s a prep school, but I doubt you know what that means,” inserted Angelina coolly. “You are, after all, an inbred Pureblood with low IQ.”

Hermione and Blaise stifled snorts, but Allan, Patrick and Dean laughed outright. Harry bit his lip, and Neville and Susan looked back and forth at the large crowd.

“Look, all I want is to go to bed and go back to Wyckham in the morning,” Harry said suddenly. “So, can you just let my friends and me through?”

When the crowd tried to surge forward, the Weasley twins starting shouting, “Move along now – seriously powerful wizard coming through!”

Allan and Patrick managed to push through the crowd, allowing Harry, Blaise, Hermione, Susan, Neville and Dean to follow through; while Oliver, Angelina, Adrian and Alicia remained behind to have a stare-off with rude Slytherins.

Fred and George silently led the way out of the Great Hall, but it seemed that the Hogwarts students didn’t want to say goodbye to Harry yet.

“Potter!” shouted a voice. Harry turned slowly and nodded in recognition to Terry Boot and Hannah Abbott.

“Boot, Abbott,” said Harry quietly. “Hello.”

Blaise muttered something beside him and Neville gave a much more exuberant greeting.

Boot slowed to a stop near Harry, breathing heavily. “You’re a hard man to catch up to, Potter,” the boy wheezed. Harry was amused; didn’t they have physical education courses at Hogwarts to keep their students in shape?

“I’m sorry?” asked Harry, trying to formulate a suitable reply.

Boot laughed. "I didn't mean to make it an accusation. Look, I just wanted to say that you played really well out there these past three days. And I'm sorry when we first met our meeting wasn't... as smooth as it could've been."

Harry shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I've heard the upperclassmen talk about how there's a tension between Hogwarts and Wyckham."

Hermione frowned. "How so? I haven't heard anyone mention it before."

"That's because your head is always in a book, Hermione," teased Susan, nudging her girlfriend.

Hermione blushed.

Blaise jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Didn't you see the Slytherins gang up on Adrian and Oliver? It's all about your bloodline here while at Wyckham it's not."

Hannah Abbott nodded, adding herself into the conversation. "I'm afraid most Hogwarts students see those from Wyckham as a bit snobbish as well."

Neville's jaw dropped. "How come?"

Boot shrugged. "It's because Wyckham students seem very proud that their school does so many irregular classes that wizards and witches are not used to. The 'I'm better than you' attitude; winning the Junior Cup will only solidify that impression."

Harry snorted. "What utter rot."

Fred replied, "Well... not really. Percy, one of our older brothers, is a prefect here at Hogwarts. He loves the set rules and the idea that this place is steeped in tradition. George and I had to fight mum and dad almost everyday to go to Wyckham during our second year. We even stopped playing pranks!"

George nodded, continuing. "Charlie, our second oldest brother, spent the optional eighth year at Wyckham because he wanted to work with dragons – which he does – but that optional year gave him better credentials for his job."

"It was only because of Charlie, not playing pranks, and almost failing our second year at Hogwarts that our parents decided to allow us to attend Wyckham."

"So... how does that relate to the Wyckham snobbery?" asked Dean, confused.

George and Fred shared a look. "Well, you see," they began together, before switching from one or the other. "Percy and Ron, our younger brother, both attend Hogwarts and since we've been home for Christmas, they say we're different... strangers... snobs, because of what we're learning."

Harry snorted. "That's a bit prejudice. But... really, as interesting as this conversation is, I'd really like to get to bed."

Terry Boot and Hannah Abbott nodded, smiling shyly. "Thanks for talking to us, Harry. Again, great game played! Goodnight!"

The two students walked away and Harry let out a sigh. He just wanted to be back at Wyckham, even if it meant being called to the Headmistress's office to explain why he went after a fake Stone.

It took another ten minutes to get to their accommodations, but it took Harry only five to brush his teeth, change into his pajamas, and fall into a troubled sleep.

"Wake up... wake up, Harry!"

Startled, Harry shot up in bed, gasping. He couldn't see anything, but his glasses were soon placed in his hands.

"Blaise?" Harry mumbled tiredly.

"No, Professor Blake," the man said, correcting Harry. "Albus Dumbledore wants to speak to you, Harry. In his office."

"Alone?" asked Harry, slipping out of bed and looking around for his uniform. The House Elves had cleaned it and placed it on his side table.

"Only if you want it to be," replied Blake. "I just came up to tell you. It's five in the morning and we don't leave until seven, so you ought to have enough time to speak with Dumbledore, if you wish."

He was making it blatantly clear it was all Harry's choice. "M'kay," the preteen agreed. "I'll see him if Flamel comes along. That okay?"

He didn't see Blake nod, as he was in the toilets changing and brushing his teeth, but he knew that Blake had agreed. The business professor was not in the dormitory when Harry stepped out, slightly more awake, but Flamel was waiting for him in the commons.

"Ready?" the older man asked.

Harry nodded.

The trip to the Headmaster's office was short; there were no teachers, ghosts, or students up that early.

"Tootsie Pops," said Flamel clearly to a stone gargoyle guarding the passage to the Headmaster's office.

It slid away to reveal a circular staircase, which the two Wyckham personnel took steadily.

Albus Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, half-moon spectacles on the tip of his nose as he looked over some important documents. He had numerous book shelves and a large number of portraits hung behind the desk, and all over the walls. The name plaques showed that they were previous Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts.

A gold perch was stationed near the left side of the desk, and a vibrant looking bird has its head tucked underneath its golden plume of a wing.

Flamel cleared his throat.

“Ah, Mr. Potter, Nicolas, please come in,” said a jovial Dumbledore, looking up. He offered a velvet pouch at them. “Would you like a Lemon drop?”

“No, thank you,” answered Flamel, but Harry took one tiredly.

“You wanted to speak with me, Headmaster Dumbledore?” asked Harry after sucking on the candy, wanting to get to the bottom of the discussion.

“Yes.” Dumbledore said plainly, peering at Harry. “I wanted to say thank you first – for saving my school and its occupants. Had Voldemort got hold of the Stone, who knows what he would do first when gaining his body back.”

“Really...” hedged Harry, “It was no big deal. Please, I’d rather not talk about that.”

“I see.” Dumbledore frowned. “What did you expect this conversation to entail, Mr. Potter?”

Harry rubbed his eyes and sighed. “Honestly, I want to know why you keep pressuring me to come to Hogwarts. I’ve made great friends, I like the professors, I like the school – there is no reason for me to come here. Hartz... that is, Headmistress Anita Hartz thought you wanted me here because it’s safest, but I do believe that Voldemort possessing Quirrell disproved that.”

Dumbledore sighed, suddenly looking far older than he was. “My apologies, Harry.” He paused, and when Harry didn’t snap at him like he had earlier in the school year when Dumbledore showed up at Wyckham, Dumbledore continued.

“I wanted you to attend Hogwarts because I felt you would be... happier here,” offered Dumbledore. “Your parents helped me so much over the years before their deaths, and I only wanted you to be happy. Lily and James were so happy here at Hogwarts... and I... well, I assumed you would be as well.”

Harry shrewdly raised an eyebrow. Dumbledore flushed.

“Of course, as I’m sure you know, I’m not a staunch supporter of Anita Hartz’s schooling methods. Having another school pop up and begin to enroll students whose parents attended Hogwarts was unnerving. As much as I believe that wizards should respect and learn about Muggle culture, I do believe for the most part, the two worlds should be kept separate.”

“Technically,” injected Harry, waving a finger at the Headmaster, “That’s still happening. All Wyckham has that Hogwarts doesn’t is more choice in subjects. Okay, so Wyckham doesn’t have houses, or points or detentions... the school works without it. Muggleborn students can take their GCSE’s and A-Levels and go to university or work in the Muggle world, or can continue in the wizard one.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I understand... and it took me quite some time to. You are happy; I thought that I could influence that happiness and give you what your parents could have wanted for you.”

“Speaking of that – why did you leave me at the Dursley’s?” asked Harry hotly. His face flushed red and the familiar anger and hurt he felt rose slowly in his chest.

Dumbledore winced. “Petunia is your mother’s sister. I felt she was the most adequate to raise you.”

“Abuse me, you mean,” snapped Harry. “My room is the cupboard under the stairs! I was cooking their meals since I was five! I’ve never had a Christmas present until I spent Christmas with the Zabini’s!” Harry took a deep breath and demanded as calmly as he could, “Explain to me why you ignored my parents’ will.”

Dumbledore paled. “You know the contents of the will?”

“Yes, I do!” the preteen snarled, anger returning. “Why am I not staying with Sirius Black? Or Remus Lupin? Or Susan Bones’ Aunt Amelia, whom I’ve met and had a great conversation with!”

Flamel placed a calming hand on Harry’s shoulder, making Harry realized he had stood and was leaning over the Headmaster’s desk in fury.

“Sirius Black is... indisposed, as is Remus Lupin,” stated Dumbledore carefully, choosing his words. “As for Amelia Bones, I admit I circumvented your parents’ will on that decision and placed you away from the wizard world. I wanted you to grow up away from the fame and press... who might have caused you to become egotistical and uncaring of others.”

“That was not your decision to make,” replied Harry evenly and coldly. His eyes flashed and he sat back in his seat, crossing his arms.

Dumbledore hung his head. “Indeed, it was not. If the Dursley’s truly have abused you so, Harry, I am sorry. I never knew... Arabella Figg was supposed to intervene” –

“Mrs. Figg is a witch?” exclaimed Harry, jumping back up again. “What rot! I had to stay with her while the Dursley’s went on vacation for a week, after school! She’s seen the bruises, seen how the neighborhood treats me and has done nothing!”

The bird on the perch trilled a few notes of a melody and Harry felt his anger cool into a simmer. Glancing over at the bird, Harry vaguely recognized it as a phoenix. Suddenly, his anger rushed out of him and he collapsed back against the chair.

“Harry? Mr. Potter?” questioned Flamel and Dumbledore together in worry.

“I’m fine,” the preteen moaned, covering his face with his hands. Dumbledore couldn’t be all bad – he had a phoenix for a familiar, a light creature who would not tolerate an inkling of darkness or dark emotion. Dumbledore was meddling, true, and perhaps a bit

conniving, but he was faultless in other events. He did not make the Dursleys abuse him, place him in a cupboard. He did not make Dudley bully him. He did not stop Sirius Black or Remus Lupin from contacting him – or, Harry thought with a frown, as far as he knew. Albus Dumbledore was not Mrs. Figg, who could have reported the Dursleys to the right authority and have him removed, but she didn't.

Harry removed his hands and placed them in his lap, looking at Dumbledore's blue eyes, which were for once, not twinkling.

"Why did you meddle in my family's finances?" Harry questioned. If anything, he would walk away from this office with answers.

"I thought it best that your monetary assets be frozen until you were of age to handle them. Even having a goblin working on them, I worried about those who would try to claim familiarity through bloodlines and swindle your money from you. I had to do it through underhand dealings so that the goblins were not aware."

Harry nodded. "I understand."

He sighed and wondered how to ask his next question, but decided in being blunt. "Why does Voldemort want to kill me? Why did he attack me and my parents all those years ago?"

Dumbledore visibly paled and twitched. "Ah, Harry... that is a question for another day..."

"Tell him, Albus. He's just fought the monster, he deserves to know why," rumbled Flamel lowly, an aura of power exuding the man.

Dumbledore glanced at his friend before lowering his eyes and staring at his desk. "Very well," he finally said after a few tense minutes. "I will not tell you everything Harry, as some of the information is of a delicate nature. You would have to learn to occlude your mind first."

"Occlude?" asked Harry.

“Occlumency, Harry,” said Flamel. “You can look it up in the library when we return.”

Dumbledore agreed, nodding. “What I can tell you, is that before you were born, a prophecy was made. The only two it could have been referring to was either you, or Neville Longbottom. Voldemort believe it to be you, a half-blood like he is, and went after you Halloween night, 1981.”

“And the prophecy?” asked Harry quietly.

“I will tell it to you when you have learned to protect your mind, Harry,” swore Dumbledore. “I promise. Until then, that is all you can know.”

Humming contemplatively, Harry crossed his ankle over his knee and nodded slowly. “I understand.” Finally, he stood, stretching his hand across the desk at Dumbledore. “Thank you, Professor Dumbledore, for answering my questions. I appreciate it.”

Dumbledore stood, shook Harry’s hand and replied, “I’m glad you are happy where you are Harry. Should you ever need my help, I am but only a letter away.”

Harry returned his hand to his side, and shoved it in his trouser pocket. “As am I, Headmaster.”

Harry fell asleep almost immediately when he slouched in his seat, only waking once at their toilet stop in London. His friends kept quiet and left him alone – something he was grateful for – but the truth was that the entire bus was contemplative and silent.

It was evening as they drove through Crawley, and it was dark enough to stargaze when they reached Wyckham. Lights shone from the upperclassmen’s dorm windows, while others were off.

Headmistress Anita Hartz was waiting for the Wyckham Quidditch team and their friends when the coach bus pulled up to the front of

the school. She stood on the steps, her arms crossed and tapping a foot.

The students slowly disembarked with Flamel and Blake first.

“Mr. Potter, Mr. Zabini, Ms. Granger,” called out Hartz as soon as they had their duffle bags. “May I please see you in my office once you put your bags away?”

The three nodded solemnly and shuffled through the quiet halls.

“Come back to our room when you’re ready to go, Hermione,” offered Blaise. “We’ll wait for you and go together.”

Harry and Blaise unlocked their room, and placed their bags on their beds. Blaise wanted to put his clothes away, but Harry, in a fit of nerves, left him alone. After all, he might have to pack everything up anyway.

Hermione arrived shortly soon after, her face pale and her hands trembling. Dean, Neville and Susan – according to Hermione – would wait up for them and any news they might have.

The three walked slowly across the darkened hallways to Anita Hartz’s office, located near the library on the second floor.

Harry knocked on her door.

“Enter!” her voice bid.

The three shuffled in, forming a line behind Harry. Hartz’s fringe covered her eyes, so she didn’t see where the students were, but the hand that held a Bic pen motioned the three to take a seat in front of her desk.

Anita Hartz’s office was a cluttered mess of filing cabinets, award frames, photographs of previous students and football games (even one or two Quidditch pictures that were moving), shelves upon shelves of books, and several comfy armchairs placed in front of her

mahogany desk. A round table and two chairs were tucked in the corner of the room, near the three floor-to-ceiling latticed windows.

Harry sat in the middle seat offered, Blaise and Hermione on either side of him.

“Headmistress, I want to just say: this was my fault entirely. I didn’t want Blaise or Hermione to get hurt but I pressured them into helping me stop Voldemort from getting the Stone,” rushed out Harry, his neck and ears red, his voice louder and squeaker than he wanted it to be.

Hartz looked up, frowning at the three eleven-year-olds. She sighed, sounding much older than she was. “I highly doubt that it was your fault entirely, Mr. Potter – Mr. Zabini and Ms. Granger have a mind of their own and would not have joined you unless they truly wished they wanted to.”

Hermione and Blaise both flushed in embarrassment and truth. They would have helped Harry regardless.

“I don’t know exactly where to begin,” admitted Hartz. She put her pen down and rubbed her temples. “The three of you were at Hogwarts for a tournament. As such, during the school year, any outings that my students go to are part of Wyckham’s responsibility. Had anything happened to you, Wyckham would have been held responsible for your deaths, any injuries, anything.”

“I understand,” the three mumbled together.

Blaise was clenching the arms of his seat, staring over Hartz’s shoulder and off into the grounds through a window. Hermione had her fingers laced together tightly and was staring hard at her hands, blinking back tears. Harry, on the other hand, was biting his lip and had his hands folded tightly in his lap, to avoid Hartz from seeing how badly they were shaking.

“I have sent a letter to your parents – and your guardians, Mr. Potter – saying that you deliberately went against your professors’ orders. I have not told them what you did, which will be up to you to tell your

parents.” Hartz straightened her shoulders at looked hard at each student, who met her eyes before lowering their gaze.

“What you three did was irresponsible and dangerous. You could have died, rather than only suffering minor injuries. You went after what you knew was a fake Philosopher’s Stone and failed to inform Nicolas Flamel, the owner of the Stone.” Said the English professor sternly, breathing deeply.

The silence in the room was deafening.

Hermione let out a tiny sob, making Harry and Blaise glance at her in worry.

“Nevertheless,” Hartz began, slowly, making the three look at her, “you did perform a good deed; Voldemort does not have the Philosopher’s Stone – in any form – and does not have a means to return to power... yet.”

Blaise let out a sigh of relief.

Hartz peered intently at Hermione and Blaise. “I wish that I could give you detentions, but Wyckham does not believe in them. If you were at Hogwarts, points would have been taken, but in this case... I think you have learned your lesson. Your parents will be tougher to please and it will be harder to explain to them your reasoning.” She smiled slightly. “What concerns me most is that you are all here and alive. I trust that you have learned your lesson, Mr. Zabini, Ms. Granger?”

The two she addressed nodded and murmured their agreement.

“Well, then, the two of you can go back to your rooms,” dismissed Hartz. “Mr. Potter, there is more that we need to speak about.”

“Yes, Headmistress,” whispered Harry in horror. He was sure he’d be expelled.

Blaise and Hermione shot Harry unidentifiable looks, leaving the room quietly.

Once the door was shut, Hartz asked, "Would you like some tea, Mr. Potter?"

"No, thank you."

Folding her arms across her desk, Anita Hartz leaned forward and spoke softly, but clearly, "Harry... look at me."

The preteen looked up, meeting his Headmistress's stare with watery eyes.

"You won't be expelled for what happened, Harry... but I am disappointed in you. When I first met you, you were a shy, young boy who wanted to please his professors and friends. When you learned of your Boy-Who-Lived status in the wizard world, you wanted to be normal. Over the course of the year, you grew confident and happy, which was exactly what you wanted. I had thought that you were secure enough in your friends and the school that you could turn to any of your professors for help," admitted Hartz, smiling softly. "I see that you still have much to learn and much more to grow."

"I wanted to stop Voldemort," whispered Harry, staring at Hartz's desk. "I wanted to make sure he couldn't come back and hurt someone... I wanted to stop him."

"I understand," replied Hartz. "He hurt you terribly, Harry. However, I can't help but wonder why you did not tell Professors Flamel or Blake about your suspicions. You did not want to bring attention to your status in the wizard world, and yet... by stopping Voldemort again, you are in today's Daily Prophet, hailed the next Merlin."

Harry moaned.

"I think I'm more disappointed than upset, Harry," confessed Hartz with a wry smile. "You're eleven. You're going to make mistakes... some mistakes are going to be small ones and others are going to be catastrophic. By going after Voldemort, you made a mistake by not asking for the help of an older, more experienced wizard or witch. The mistake was not small – but it was not so enormous either. You are alive and relatively unharmed."

Harry opened his mouth to reply, to defend his reasoning, but realized that Hartz was right. He made a mistake, a rather stupid one that could've killed Blaise or Hermione. It was a fake Stone; there was no reason to stop Voldemort, as he would've learned it was a dud regardless when it failed to perform like it ought to have.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, in want of anything else to say.

"I know."

"I made a mistake, and it won't happen again."

Hartz smiled, "I doubt it will. Without making mistakes, we do not learn. We do not experience life, learn right from wrong. The next time something like this happens again, you'll know to turn to an adult for help."

Harry paused. "Headmistress..."

"Yes?"

"Dumbledore... this morning we spoke. He said..." Harry struggled to find the right words, as everything Dumbledore spoke to him earlier was still jumbled up inside. "He said that there is a prophecy regarding Voldemort and myself. What if... what if one day I have to face him again, like how I did yesterday?"

Anita Hartz bit her lip and looked down at her desk. "I wouldn't want it to happen, Harry," she revealed, her eyes shadowed and haunted. "I would never want my students hurt or feel as though they have to do something."

"But what if it's fate? Destiny?" questioned Harry, his trembling subsiding now that he knew he was in the safe.

Hartz shrugged. "I suppose, if there is no way around it... that you fight him. That you fight Voldemort, stand up for what you believe in, and hope to hell that you can beat him."

“Will Wyckham help me do that?” asked Harry, in a small voice. “I can’t help thinking that Hogwarts wouldn’t, but a private tutor would help me focus more on the subjects I’d need to learn, like defense and dark arts.”

“Harry...” began Hartz, “You know just as well as I do that Wyckham is three years’ ahead of Hogwarts when it comes to their curriculum. I have a strong suspicion that when – if – you should fight Voldemort again, you will be more than ready to hold him off until help arrives.”

She smiled at the boy. “You’re not alone, Harry, and if it truly will come down between the big, bad Dark Lord and the young, noble man... your friends, and those here at Wyckham will be there to help you in any way we possibly could.”

She suddenly waved her hand and the somber tone left her voice. “Now, that doesn’t mean to go looking for trouble; I have enough on my hands with the Weasley twins. They let loose a bunch of frogs from the pond at the far end of the campus in the girls’ toilets just a few minutes before you and your friends arrived. I have to go do damage control.”

Harry smiled at the Wyckham Headmistress. “Try not to think too much of the future, Harry,” she continued, standing and walking with Harry to the door. “Live in the here and now, without regrets. The rest of your life will come soon enough.”

“So, I won’t be going home?”

“No, not tonight at the very least,” laughed Hartz. “However, after you finish your exams, come back to my office. There is something else we will need to discuss, but I won’t let it taint our brilliant win of Hogwarts in Quidditch! Get a good nights’ sleep... I’ll see you and your friends in the morning.”

Harry offered a “good night” as well, returning to his room, feeling lightheaded. He wasn’t expelled, he wasn’t being sent home. Those were good things, but on a darker note, he made a mistake which could have killed his best friends. He made a poor error of judgment

and took control of the situation when he should have had an adult handle it.

Without a doubt, Harry learned from his mistake, and would strive to do better in the future. Hartz had touched on a deep part of himself that he hadn't wanted to know: he liked pleasing people. Hartz, Blake and Flamel were disappointed in him, and Harry found that was worse than anything.

Harry wanted to be normal, be seen as Harry Potter – not Harry Potter, James and Lily's son, not the Boy-Who-Lived. His people-pleasing nature wanted him to show that Harry Potter was able to make good decisions, handle himself according to his age and the situation, and do his best.

His professors obviously thought that he was above following the desire for revenge – especially at eleven, honestly, what was he thinking! – and their disappointment shattered him. With their help, he would have the skills and knowledge necessary to become an Auror and fight for revenge that way.

When he entered his dorm room, Blaise and Hermione sat up; they had been resting on Blaise's bed, waiting for Harry's return. The lights were off and the curtains drawn.

"Well?" asked Hermione quietly, in bated breath.

"It's okay," said Harry, feeling a weight be lifted from his shoulders. "I'm not expelled, not really in too much trouble. I made... a horrible mistake... I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? We followed you, Harry, we knew that there might be some danger," argued Blaise heatedly, albeit in a whisper. No one wanted the off-chance of a professor telling them to go to bed, that they were too loud.

"We're eleven! I shouldn't have even suggested it," countered Harry. "I made a horrible mistake, Blaise – one that could have killed you or Hermione."

Hermione patted Harry's shoulder. "But we're here now, Harry, and we're alive. We're not dead. Everything is fine."

Harry gave a wobbly sigh, one that showed he was on the fringe of tearing up and crying, hearing Hartz's words come back at him. He sniffled once, twice, and then slumped onto his bed.

"I know," he said softly, needing the reaffirmation, "I know everything is fine."

Hermione didn't say anything else; a few minutes later she whispered a soft "goodnight" and left the dorm room. Blaise crawled into bed and turned on his side to face Harry.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked, staring at the lump that was his friend.

"I think so," came the muffled reply. Blaise heard a few loose sobs and sniffles, and had to strain his ears for what Harry said next. "I don't want to lose my friends, too."

Blaise frowned, worried. "Harry? It'll be okay Harry. I promise: I won't leave you."

Both boys had a restless night.

Exams ran from June 15 to the 25th, with the older students doing their exams first. They were stressful for the first years; they didn't know what to expect and studied long and hard for them.

The history exam was a true/false and short answer five-page test in class, so time was not taken from their study periods for heavier courses.

The English exam had a series of short answers with a passage to read, and an essay question to write about; math was a series of true/false questions and four lengthy problem solving questions at the very end.

Defense was a practical exam where the students went one-against-one with their professor and answered questions he asked them before the practical began; potions was simply theoretical, as they had an end-of-term potion assignment due in class.

Charms and Transfiguration were like Defense, working alone with the professor and answering any questions they asked. The students felt much better afterward, as well.

Dance and gym had no practical exams.

Once Harry finished his Charms exam, he relaxed with his friends by the pond at the far end of the campus, underneath an old, thick oak tree.

"First year at Wyckham is almost over," said Susan reverently. "Can you believe how fast the year went by?"

"Too fast," agreed Dean, sketching Harry and Blaise as they leaned against each other, back-to-back. Blaise was slightly dozing.

Hermione had her legs crossed over her ankles, a thick book propped up against her knees. She would idly flip a page, merely skimming the text rather than reading it.

Neville and Susan were playing wizard's chess, but not really caring and letting the pieces dictate where they wanted to go.

"School isn't officially over until the 27th," argued Harry sleepily. "It's only the 25th. We had our last exam just this morning. Don't rush it."

Susan laughed. "Harry, you know what Hartz said: anyone done their exams can leave anytime they wish up until the 27th when everyone has to go. Auntie is picking me up tonight."

"And Gran is coming by tomorrow for me," said Neville.

"Dean and I are going home with my parents tomorrow as well," offered Hermione from her place against the tree trunk.

“What’s going to happen with you, Harry?” asked Blaise, having been wakened by Susan’s laugh.

“I don’t know,” admitted Harry. “I’d rather not go back to the Dursley’s.”

“You know mum and dad would be more than pleased to have you stay with us in our villa!” exclaimed Blaise. “Besides, weren’t you telling me that Hartz wanted to see you when you were done your exams? Maybe it’s about living arrangements.”

“Maybe... then I ought to go see her,” agreed Harry, stretching and standing. Blaise fell on his back, rubbing his head, and Dean bemoaned the loss of his models.

Harry brushed pieces of grass off his trousers and told his friends he’d see them later in the commons.

Along the way back to the school, Harry saw several students he knew by name, waving and calling out hellos. Oliver Wood was getting in a last game of Quidditch with his year mates: Adrian, Miles Bletchley, Roger Davis, and Joseph Harper. Inside, a few students lounged near the library or by the indoor pool, hoping to cool off and avoid the heat. There, Harry was stopped by Angelina and Alicia, both who told him to practice his Quidditch moves during the summer.

“I can’t,” argued Harry, “I live in a Muggle neighborhood.”

Finally, Harry arrived at Hartz’s door and knocked.

“Come in,” she called.

Harry pushed open the door and settled himself in the same armchair he sat in the last time he’d been in the English professor’s office.

“Hello Harry,” began Hartz, signing her name on a piece of paper and placing it in a folder. “How are you?”

"I'm okay," he replied. "You told me to come see you when my exams were done."

"That's right," answered Hartz easily. "It hadn't made much of a difference when you first came to Wyckham, but with the summer holidays upon us, it matters now."

She smiled at Harry and sighed softly. "Harry, please be honest. How is your life at the Dursley's?"

"Horrible," Harry admitted. "My room is the cupboard under the stairs; I was forced to cook for them since I can remember."

Hartz nodded and rested her head in a propped-up hand. "As a teacher, Harry, I have to contact the proper authorities when there is a case of child abuse, or suspicion of abuse. Two days ago, I contacted the Regional Surrey police and social services. I'm letting you know in advance because I will personally be taking you to Little Whining to meet with the local police and a social worker. I will be acting as a witness."

"I see," exhaled Harry. "What do you need from me?"

Anita Hartz smiled and passed Harry a few sheets of paper. "You have a few options, Harry. You could remain with the Dursley's with periodic visits from a social worker made through the NSPCC; you could be placed in a foster home; or you could be placed in an orphanage." Harry took the papers and looked them over.

"I would personally be happier if you went to a foster family. Those papers have a few families that know of magic but are part of a non-magical neighborhood," explained Hartz. "They would not stop you from visiting your friends, going to Diagon Alley, central London, or mostly anything that you wish unless it's harmful to yourself."

"Thank you!" exclaimed Harry. "I hadn't... I wasn't sure what was to happen with me this summer. This is more than I expected."

"You're not the first of my students who needed my help, Harry," reminded Hartz gently. "If you could tell me which family you might

feel most comfortable with, they can be there on the 27th when you meet with the social worker and authorities.”

Harry pursued the names and the details Hartz had given him, before finally choosing an older couple who already had a grown-up son that lived near Hermione and Dean in Rochester. They had two other foster children living with them, making Harry the third if he chose.

It would be a bit of a drive to Surrey in West Sussex for them, but Harry thought they sounded like they were the best.

“I’ll contact them and drive you down myself tomorrow midday,” offered Hartz. “Hopefully I won’t see you early this year, Harry.”

Harry laughed and thanked Hartz again, leaving the office.

Harry sat on an uncomfortable wooden bench in a local judicial court, Anita Hartz beside him and the Dursley’s on the other side of the aisle. The Woolworths, the older couple that Harry picked, were seated behind him and Hartz. Harry already liked them very much, as Robert and Heather arrived early and Harry and Hartz were invited out to lunch with them.

Petunia and Vernon were quite obvious in their dislike for their nephew and explained that they only took him in because of duress. The judge wasn’t too impressed and quickly reviewed the Woolworth’s file before asking Harry what he wanted.

“If they would take me,” began Harry in a small voice, “I would like to see what living with the Woolworth’s would be like.”

Two hours later, Harry’s decision was granted and the Woolworth’s were asking Harry if he wanted to join meet his foster brother and sister right away or stay in London for the night.

A throat being cleared behind them had Harry turning, looking at his Aunt Petunia in surprise.

“Aunt Petunia...?” asked Harry.

The skinny woman pushed a cardboard box at Harry. “Here. Your birth certificate, your mother’s birth certificate, and items from her... school,” the woman sneered. “I figured it would be best if you had it.”

“Thank you,” replied Harry, touched. “I appreciate this. Take care of yourself, will you?” Even if he hated her, politeness urged him to have a kind goodbye.

Of course, his aunt cared less and with a “humph!” walked away with her nose in the air.

Hartz sighed. “Well, no real loss there,” she murmured. Smiling down at Harry, she handed him a thick white envelope. “Information about next year, and your schedule, plus your exam marks. Have a good summer, Harry. I’ll see you in September.”

“Goodbye Professor!” Harry replied with enthusiasm, turning to the Woolworths. “I think I’m ready to go home.”

AN: Thanks to Kyntor, who told me that by 1991, certified teachers had to report all cases of suspect/child abuse, else they would lose their license. The NSPCC stands for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, a charity based in the UK. I don’t know how the authorities handle foster care, so I did my best here by giving Harry a choice.

I’ve had a lot of reviews about character development; I’ll admit that it’s not something I’m very good at... which is why I stick to writing fan fiction rather than take the AU stories I’ve created and turn them into an original fiction piece. I work with set characters that already exist and have quirks and personality traits... creating someone from scratch isn’t easy, which is why you won’t find many OCs shown predominantly.

I appreciate every single review that gives me suggestions and kind words; these help improve my writing.

As for canon events in an AU story: I truly believe that even if Harry went to another school, Voldemort would still want to go after the Stone – therefore, things like the Gringott's break-in, the traps beneath Fluffy, the mirror... those would all be there regardless. As for the obstacles beneath the trapdoor, I do believe they would continue to be in that order.

Hermione may have been slightly weird, with me taking that one sentence from PS – but I like to think she would've said it because she likes Harry's company, his friendship and Harry knows that she and Blaise are better academically than he is... but that Harry has something else – the qualities of the leader, a hero.

Other small canon events will continue to pop up – the diary, the Basilisk, Tom Riddle, Sirius Black escaping Azkaban... If those canon events bother you, you might not want to continue reading. I'm choosing events that would occur whether or not Harry would be at Hogwarts, because they exist outside of Harry's reach and influence.

This was, by far, the hardest chapter to write, so... if there are flames, be kind and make it constructive criticism instead? – Kneazle

Chamber of Secrets

Chapter Nine

Rochester, England: July 5, 1992

The house that the Woolworth's lived in, in Rochester, was a comfortable two-storey, white brick with sky blue shutters and door, Tudor. It had what Heather called ominously, "The Tower," which was actually a third-floor aesthetic design, as a square storage room, since the storage designed for the house was too small to hold large amounts. The tower had its own door, own staircase, and looked out over the nicely sized backyard and street.

"Sean and Holly already have their own rooms," began Robert Woolworth nervously, glancing through his rearview mirror at Harry, who sat behind the passenger seat in their 1991 BMW 5-series four-door. "Sean's fifteen, and Holly just turned four a week ago. Sean's a foster-child as well, but Holly's our adoptive daughter."

Harry opened his door and Robert popped the boot hatch, helping Harry with his trunk. He continued a nervous stream of dialogue as they lugged the trunk into the entrance way (Harry completely forgot he could use magic without the Ministry finding out).

"Heather's mother is a squib from a pureblood family here in Britain; they disowned her but she kept her last name – Parkinson – until she married Heather's father. Because of that, Sean's known about magic since he arrived here when he was your age: twelve, despite the fact he doesn't have a drop of magic in him. Holly's just going to grow up knowing about it, regardless."

Harry nodded, looking around the homey entrance way. The halls were lined with warm, light-coloured wood panels, with metalwork designs as furniture and light fixtures added characters. Family photos, landscape paintings and children's artwork lined the walls as well, leading into a warm and toasty "country" kitchen that smelled like freshly baked cookies.

“Sean’s currently out with his friends from the neighborhood,” added Heather, smoothing down her hair and her dress in one motion, then picking up Hedwig’s cage. “Holly’s at a neighbor’s – being babysat – so that we could have time to meet with you and get to know you, Harry.”

“Thank you,” said Harry, licking his lips. He was rather nervous as well. At least with the Dursleys, he knew what to expect. “Where will I be staying?”

“Remember how I was talking about the tower?” asked Heather, leading Harry up a curved metal and wood staircase by the front door.

Harry nodded.

“Well, we used it primarily for storage, but Robert built a shed earlier this month in the backyard, so we’re using that for storage now – you’ll be in the tower.” The woman said this in a breathless rush, as she was wont to do.

“I get my own room?” asked Harry in surprise. Heather glanced down at him, and then over his shoulder to Robert, who was coming up the stairs behind Harry with his trunk.

“Of course you do, Harry!” breathed Heather, in worry, as her eyebrows drew down together and the lines around her mouth became more pronounced. “Goodness, what did you expect us to give you? The couch?” She gave a breathless laugh.

Harry blushed, the tips of his ears turning a hot red.

They passed several open doors, all which were explained along the way as they passed them.

“This is the linen closet – and Holly’s room, it always smells like baby powder since Robert made one explode while learning to change our son’s diaper nearly twenty years ago now – oh, and this is Sean’s room, as you can see by his sign on the door... it’s very messy, but it’s a teenager’s room. Sean doesn’t like it when we go inside without his permission, so always knock first... this on the left is the guest

powder room, which you'll share with Sean, Harry – and this door here on the left is the master bedroom..."

They reached the end of the hall, where one final door stood, shut. Robert huffed and puffed behind them, dropping the trunk happily with a bang. His face was red and he was sweaty.

"Blimey, Harry, what do you have in that trunk of yours?" he wheezed.

Harry grinned shyly, before answered, "Everything I own. All my books for school, clothes, and things like that."

Robert didn't answer, and Heather twisted the knob with a free hand to reveal a small six by four empty space and a steep, narrow staircase beginning barely a foot away from where the door was.

"It'll be a bit tricky getting the trunk up." Robert rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Can you place a spell on it or something?" the man then flushed. "Sorry – I forgot you can't do magic outside of school."

Startled, Harry shook his head. "Professor Flamel taught us how to remove the Ministry tracking from our wands... we can do magic doing the summer hols."

Heather shuffled into the clear space to the side of the stairs. "Really? I thought Hogwarts doesn't allow that..."

"I'm not at Hogwarts," stated Harry firmly. "I'm at Wyckham Academy."

Heather brightened, with her voice breathy again. "Oh, are you now! I've heard so much about the new school, and so much good from other parents. Their football team has managed to get a write-up in The Times."

"We did?" Harry's eyes lit up. "Wood's a great captain."

"You're on the team?" asked Robert, as Harry turned to hit and pulled out his wand (hidden in his front pocket). Harry tapped the trunk and it shrunk to the size of a matchbox.

“Yes,” said a proud Harry, “I’m a second string defense striker. Wood said that next year – this upcoming school year – I’ll be able to play as a first string striker more, because I didn’t have the practice before.”

“That’s great!” breathed Heather with a bright smile. Hedwig hooted from her cage. “Have you considered playing during the summer? There’s a recreational league Robert and I can sign you up for, so you stay in shape!”

“I’d love that, thank you so much!” exclaimed Harry in surprise. Heather reached forward and squeezed his bicep, smiling hugely.

“I’ll get right to it,” promised Robert, who then cleared his throat, mopping his sweaty neck with a handkerchief. “Let’s continue with the tour, though, shall we?”

Heather clasped her hands and nodded. “This space, Harry, will be for you. We have a desk we can move up here so you can have a quiet space separate from your room for studying.”

Harry nodded, following Heather and Robert up the stairs.

When they reached the top, Harry exhaled loudly. “Beautiful!”

The room was the size of the Dursley’s living room, with two large windows taking up two of the walls. The last wall had a wardrobe against it and a dresser beside the wardrobe.

A bed was directly against the last window-less wall, but much closer to the window to avoid the wardrobe doors not being able to open fully. It was a twin bed, with masculine sheets and a comforter all done in various shades of blue. A night table with solitary lamp and electronic alarm clock took up most of the night table’s space.

“We have a few extra pieces of furniture that you can rummage though in the shed out back,” offered Heather hesitantly. “We weren’t sure what you liked, Harry, so we thought leaving the room bare

would be best. This way, you can decorate all you like, and make the room yours.”

“I’m completely floored, Heather,” replied Harry, turning slowly and taking the room in. “Before this, my room was the cupboard under the stairs, and at Wyckham, my best friend and I share a dorm room. I’ve never had my own room. You could’ve painted it pink and purple and I would’ve still loved it!”

Robert let out a hearty chuckle. “Then I’m glad we didn’t. Now, I know you have a wonderful pet owl” – Here, the man motioned to the cage Heather was carrying – “and as such, we left the curtains off one window. It can stay open all the time so she can fly in and out as she wishes.”

Heather placed Hedwig’s cage on the dresser and opened the latch. The snowy owl gracefully flew to Harry and rested on his shoulder. Robert moved over to that window and opened it.

“Hey, girl,” murmured Harry gently, letting Hedwig nibble on his index finger gently.

“She’s very beautiful, Harry,” commented Robert with a smile. “Now, Heather and I will let you get settled in and unpacked. Dinner will be at six-thirty and is completely informal. One of us will come up to tell you dinner is ready... until then: relax!”

Harry nodded gratefully and kept standing in place until Heather and Robert were down the stairs; at the smart snap of the door closing, Harry let out a breath and carefully settled on the twin bed. The mattress sagged a bit under his weight but was nicely firm.

“So, Hedwig,” began Harry, “I think we can safely say that this is a large improvement from the Dursley’s.”

Hedwig flew off Harry’s shoulder, soaring through the open window and presumably to hunt for her own dinner.

Harry tapped the matchbox sized trunk once with his wand and it enlarged suddenly to its proper size. Harry then unlatched his trunk,

pulling out his clothing first and placing them in the wardrobe and dresser, in the same order as he would back at Wyckham. Socks, underwear, and t-shirts in the dresser; trousers, jackets, uniform sweater, pullovers and his shoes went in the wardrobe.

His books, cauldron, and toiletries would have to wait until he looked through the Woolworth's spare furniture later that evening or tomorrow in the sunlight. His broom, however, was placed up against the wall between the two windows. He would find a proper mantle for it later.

His cleats and portable radio that Hartz gave him for Christmas went on top of the dresser next to Hedwig's cage.

Although Wyckham didn't assign summer homework, the school did assume that its students – very studious and competitive by nature – would continue to read their previous texts (especially in magic) before getting their booklist for the next year. Harry, fortunately, had his already and would be able to go whenever his new guardians would permit him to travel to Diagon Alley and London.

Harry didn't know what he would do to pass the time; it was only five in the afternoon. Finally, he rummaged through his trunk and pulled out his transfiguration text – as it was his worst subject – and began to reread it from the beginning.

He managed to get through halfway – up until they came to Animagi. He was interrupted by a deep, youthful and slightly scornful, voice.

“So you're Harry Potter.”

Jerking up in fright, Harry shot off his bed with his wand in hand and pointed at a teenager leaning against the stair railing. He had a lean build that was turning into a broad-shouldered one, with stylishly messy brown hair and brown eyes. He wore baggy jeans and a t-shirt. His socks were white and floppy at the front.

“You must be Sean,” answered Harry instead, sheepishly putting his wand away. “Sorry about that.”

The teen shrugged. "No harm done. Heather says dinner is ready. She didn't know what your favourite was, so she just made Fettuccini Alfredo, garlic bread and a Caesar salad for the side."

"That sounds great." Harry slid his wand into his wand holster, dog-earring the page he was last on. "Thank you for coming to get me."

Sean shrugged. "No problem." He then turned and bounded down the stairs, Harry following him. The silence was unnerving, so Harry tried to start a conversation.

"Heather and Robert said you're fifteen?" asked Harry.

Sean hummed. "I'm almost sixteen," he said shortly, before blushing slightly and amended, "Sixteen in January, actually."

"Will you be learning to drive soon then?"

Sean nodded. They were now walking down the main staircase. "As soon as Rob says I can. He didn't want me to learn until recently... I had to make it up to him."

At the cryptic statement, Harry frowned, puzzled, but the sentence was soon banished from his mind as the smell of garlic and cream sauce hit his nose. His stomach growled, and Harry scrambled into the kitchen after Sean.

Heather introduced him to a bubbly blonde Holly Woolworth, their adoptive daughter, and the meal began. Robert turned to Sean and asked how his afternoon was, and then asked Harry what he thought of the Tower.

Harry had to fight to keep a wide grin off his face.

Robert signed Harry up for recreational football in the region, and he, Heather, Holly and Sean came out to every game the team had.

Harry's letters to his friends, and phone calls to Dean and Hermione, were all the same: I love it here, the Woolworth's are great, but I miss my friends.

By the end of July, Harry's twelfth birthday was only a few scant days away. However, considering how the Dursley's refused to even acknowledge Harry, he was sure that the Woolworth's would not want to do anything.

How wrong he was.

Harry woke up on July 31st to a growling stomach as the strong scent of pancakes, maple syrup, and coffee drifted up through his open door and up the staircase. Rushing downstairs, he slid into his seat at the six-person table eager for a wonderful breakfast.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" smiled Heather widely, placing two fluffy pancakes, a number of bacon slices, scrambled eggs and a side of fresh fruit in front of the twelve-year-old.

"Thanks, Heather!" Harry cut a large piece of the pancake away and stuffed it in his mouth. Across from him, Holly giggled and took a large bite of her own pancake.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" Holly imitated. She sipped at her plastic cup.

Sean was sitting next to Harry, yawning tiredly. Robert was at the head of the table, reading the Times, and Heather continued to create food masterpieces.

"Harry," chirped Heather, "Do you remember when I asked for the names of your friends? Well, I used Hedwig – I'm sorry that it was without your permission, sweetie, but your owl understood – and sent out invitations to your friends to come by this afternoon."

Harry gapped. Heather mistook his expression for the fact that she used his owl. She wrung her hands together and bit her lip.

"I'm sorry, Harry... I didn't mean to use Hedwig without your permission, but I didn't know how to contact your wizard friends through the telephone..."

Sean, Robert and Holly were watching the two now; Sean was scowling lightly and Robert had an eyebrow raised.

"Y-You..." stuttered Harry, "You're giving me a birthday party?"

Heather stopped wailing in the background about privacy and personal items to stare at Harry with teary eyes. She sniffled and nodded. "Well, of course, sweetie... you're twelve today!"

"I've never had a birthday party before..." breathed Harry in surprise. "Thank you."

Heather began wailing again, hugging him tightly while Robert chuckled and went back to newspaper. Sean rolled his eyes and shared a glance with Holly; the two continued to eat, ignoring their foster mother and new brother.

"Your room is amazing, Harry," commented Hermione, as she looked out of the large windows into the backyard. "I'm sure once you start putting up posters and the newspaper articles about you, it'll start to feel roomy."

"It already feels roomy," laughed Harry.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at the black-haired birthday boy; Blaise, sitting next to Harry on his bed, threw a crisp at Hermione. Dean caught it before it hit Hermione and ate it.

"Mm, sour cream and onion!"

"Ew, gross!" Susan's nose twisted as though she smelled something vile. "I like my plain crisps, thank you very much."

The group laughed, enjoying their time together.

Neville had spent the majority of his summer working in his family's greenhouse, applying techniques he learned from books and sending letters to Wyckham's herbology professor Shun'u Yuuki for tips.

Hermione was in France until a few days ago. She was slightly tanned and came bearing gifts for all of her friends – Susan was quite happy with her beret.

Blaise spent his summer in Italy so far, and would do so until mid-August. His parents had already spoken to Heather and Robert without Harry's knowledge; Harry would be joining Blaise the following day at Bramasole again, for a week.

Susan and Dean enjoyed their summer by spending it with family and hanging around their houses. Dean would watch the telly and play with his younger siblings, while Susan spent time with her Aunt Amelia and studying.

"So what does Robert and heather do for a living, Harry?" asked Neville curiously.

Harry leaned back against his pillows. "Robert owns his company, an advanced technology firm that is supporting CERN right now."

Hermione looked humbled and awed at the same time. "CERN?" she breathed.

"Heather is a copyeditor for an independent publishing firm," continued Harry, ignoring his bookish friend's idiosyncrasies.

"Do you have your schedule for next year yet?" asked Hermione, perking up.

"Hartz gave it to me after the court trial," explained Harry. He flicked his wrist and his wand left its holster to slide into his hand. "Accio Wyckham schedule!"

A couple sheets of thick, cream paper flew toward Harry from his dresser table; the preteen caught them and handed the sheets to Hermione, who read them out loud.

Dear student of Wyckham Academy,

Enclosed in this letter is your schedule for the upcoming 1992-1993 school year. Also enclosed is a list of holiday dates, football and Quidditch games held at the Wyckham campus, and the tentative dates in June for the Junior Quidditch League, being held at Hogwarts again.

Permission slips have been included for three day trips to London for your English class; students will be attending three Shakespearean plays in London on various days throughout the two semesters: one before the holiday break, and two afterward.

Your booklist is also included on the flip side of your schedule. Please note that the majority of the items needed for you magical classes can be found at Diagon Alley, London. Uniforms, non-magical items and club-wear may be found in any large city or town.

Should your parents or guardians have any questions, they may contact Wyckham's Administration office at 020 7946 0346 between the hours of 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Sincerely,

Anita Hartz, Headmistress & Head of English;

Matthew Blake, Deputy Headmaster, & Head of Business and Communications;

Nicolas Flamel, Deputy Headmaster, Alchemist & Potions Master

Hermione pulled out Harry's schedule (as they would all have the same classes until they chose their electives at the end of the upcoming school year) and looked over it.

“We’ll have English at 9am Mondays and Wednesday; Potions at 9am Tuesdays and Thursdays; charms Friday at 9am... history at 11am on Mondays, and math at 11am Tuesdays and Thursdays.” Hermione looked up from the paper and bit her lip. “A bit condensed and heavy in the morning, isn’t it?”

“What about the afternoons?” asked Harry.

Hermione glared at him. “Are you saying you didn’t look before now?”

“Of course not!” declared Harry. “It’s only July... why would I look any earlier than when I know they’ve received the books at various bookstores across London? No point getting them too early in case there are changes with the booklist.”

Susan took the paper from Hermione’s tight grip – her friend valued education above everything else – and continued to read from it.

“Defense against the Dark Arts at 1pm every Monday and Wednesday, with gym class for you Harry, afterward at 4pm. Transfiguration is every Tuesday and Thursday at 1pm. Our dance class isn’t until Friday at 4.”

“Oh wow!” Dean became glassy-eyed. “Only charms on Friday for us guys then!”

Neville sighed in relief and leaned back in the chair Robert had brought up for them. Neville crossed his ankles and smiled.

Blaise took the paper from Susan and skimmed over it quickly, raising his eyebrows here and there when he read something. “Shall I read the booklist?”

The group vocalized their affirmation.

Second Year students will require:

ENGLISH

Shakespeare, W. “The Taming of the Shrew”

Frank, A. "The Diary of Anne Frank"

Lewis, C.S. "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe"

Malecrit, "Alas, I Have Transfigured My Feet trans." ("Hélas, j'ai Transfiguré mes Pieds")

TRANSFIGURATION

Switch, E. "A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration"

DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS

Slinkhard, W. "The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection"

Livelong, A. "Death Omens: What To Do When You Know The Worst Is Coming"

Paranoia, H. "Practical Defensive Magic and Its Uses Against the Dark Arts"

POTIONS

Jigger, A. "Magical Drafts and Potions"

Eval, K. "Most Potente Potions"

CHARMS

Norton (Waving Wands Publication), "An Anthology of 18-Century Charms"

Hopscotch, L. "Achievements in Charming"

HISTORY

Studieren, F. "A Guide to Medieval Sorcery"

Bagshot, B. "A History of Magic"

OTHER (RECOMMENDED)

Goshawk, M. "The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 3 & 4"

This text can be found in Diagon Alley's "Flourish & Blotts" under the fiction section

Students should already have copies of the Standard Book of Spells, Grades 1 & 2 from their first year at Wyckham, and should continue to reference minor and easier spells of theory and base work from these texts as the year progresses

Students should be made aware that math and history texts are available at Wyckham Academy and are loaned to students for the year. It is their responsibility to maintain and care for these texts as they are school property. Lost or damaged texts will result in a fine of £25.

"That's a lot of books," commented Dean once Blaise stopped reading. "Well, let it never be said that Wyckham doesn't try to drive their students to the ground!"

"I wonder how the fifth and seventh year students manage," breathed Harry in awe. "With their OWLs and NEWTs, I mean. Plus, there will be electives next year, so we'll have more classes added."

"Yes, but don't forget that we drop dance and history next year!" Susan exclaimed brightly. Susan was a gentle girl, and did much better in Charms and Transfiguration than in potions, dance, or history.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but a loud snap echoed in Harry's tower, similar to a balloon popping. A house elf had appeared in Harry's room, landing barely a foot away from Harry.

Startled, and flailing his arms, Harry fell off the side of his bed. He fell to the hardwood floor with a thump.

“Harry!” exclaimed his friends, Blaise darting off the bed and around it to help his best mate up. Hermione and Susan were asking Harry if he was all right, loudly and trying to speak over the other; Dean and Neville were staring agape at the elf, wondering what he was doing in Harry Potter’s bedroom in Rochester.

The elf wrung his narrow fingers together in a fit of nerves and horror.

“I am sorry, Harry Potter, sir!” the elf wailed, causing everyone talking to stop and stare.

“Who are you?” asked Harry, rising slowly from the other side of the bed. Blaise stood next to him, eyes narrowed and fingering his wand that was hidden behind his friends’ back.

The elf shuffled his bare feet slowly, dipping into a low bow. “I am Dobby.”

“Nice to meet you Dobby,” responded Harry dryly. He stiffened when the house elf began to tear up. “Um, no need to cry...”

“The Great Harry Potter is so kind! So noble! So polite! Greeting Dobby like an equal!” Dobby sobbed, clutching his ragged and stained uniform. Harry thought it looked like a mutilated tea cozy.

Hermione’s mouth was open and her eyes wide as she stared at the elf. The house elves at Wyckham were used to polite students arriving at the kitchens at all manner of time, asking for snacks and drinks. They would bow and fawn over the students (especially Harry and Blaise) and ensure they were happy. However, those elves were also scrubbed squeaky clean, with clean and immaculate uniforms and were treated very well.

Dobby, on the other hand, looked ragged in tattered and stained clothing; he had darker green bumps on his head and a part of his ear was missing. He fawned over Harry as though he was God himself, and ignored everyone else in the room – or it seemed like it. His large eyes shifted to each person in a way that seemed un-House Elf-like, causing Blaise to narrow his eyes further and grip his wand tighter.

“Dobby has come to warn Harry Potter!” the House Elf continued.

Harry’s eyebrow’s disappeared under his fringe. “Pardon me?”

“Harry Potter sir must not return to Hogwarts!” continued Dobby, as though Harry did not speak.

Blaise burst out laughing.

“Well, there’s no worry about that.” Harry grinned at Dobby. “I won’t go back to Hogwarts then.”

Dobby visibly sagged in relief and nodded. “Dobby is relieved!”

Hermione again, opened her mouth to say something but Dobby disappeared with another loud snap and the room was silent.

“I take it that Dobby’s master didn’t know I go to Wyckham and not Hogwarts, huh?” asked Harry rhetorically and with cheek.

Neville sighed. “Well, that House Elf is a bit weird, anyway; he warned you about a dastardly”—Neville adopted a crisp, villainous accent and then dropped it—“plot to once again, do you in.”

Susan and Dean chuckled behind their hands at Harry’s puckered brows and pout. He sighed. “It’s always me, isn’t it?”

Blaise patted Harry on his shoulder. “Always, mate. We just thought you’d be used to it by now.”

Harry shook his head. “You can never be used to evil Dark Lords and their minions trying to kill you in an attempt to take over the world. They keep coming up with some really crazy plans that continue to shock and amaze you. Otherwise, life would just be too boring without them.”

Spending the week in Italy was good for Harry's soul, so to speak. He and Blaise spent the entire week being unbearable lazy and being waited on by the Zabini House Elves. They had retreated on the first day back to the outbuilding at the edge of the Zabini property, where they first tasted champagne last year for New Years' Eve. That outbuilding was considered "Blaise and Harry's spot," and few dared to endure their wrath if they wandered in on the two.

Harry told Blaise about the Woolworth's and how he enjoyed living with them, and secretly adored being doted on – a concept new to him. Blaise listened patiently and once Harry was euphoric on memories of his new family, suggested that they raid his Uncle Vinnie's vineyard.

The two were caught and 'grounded'; they would help out Vinnie and the House Elves collect the grapes and that summer Blaise and Harry learned the process of making wine.

At the end of Harry's "mini-vacation," Harry was tanned, filled to his nose with pasta, garlic bread, lasagna and other yummy concoctions from Francesca's recent cookbook.

Blaise said a merry goodbye to his best friend and told him that he would meet Harry on August 19th at the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry agreed, and that night at dinner with the Woolworth's, Harry passed on Francesca's hand-written recipe for Buitoni pasta with Italian-seasoned chicken breasts. Harry's mouth salivated thinking about the delicious meal Mrs. Zabini had prepared for his last night at Bramasole.

The rest of August went by fairly fast; Harry had two more football games before the recreational season was up. His team won both games and Harry found he had enough experience to confidently ask Wood to promote him to first string when school began.

On the morning of August 19th, Harry woke early and ate a hearty breakfast consisting of kippers, toast and a tea. Harry had never been a fan of fish for breakfast until Heather asked him to try (Sean found them mouth-watering, but Sean was a funny sort: he had an

obsession with seafood and the sea in general and wanted to study oceanography at university).

Robert volunteered to drive him to Diagon Alley, as his office was located in London proper, and would pick Harry up again at 5pm.

Blaise was waiting for Harry outside the portal into Diagon Alley via the Leaky Cauldron, with Hermione next him. A surprised Harry hugged his other best friend and the three made their way down the crowded street toward Flourish & Blotts.

“It’s really busy here!” commented Hermione in surprise as they squeezed their way between two large and very bored wizards. A queue had formed around Flourish and Blotts and the inside of the store looked like a hurricane had hit.

Books were teetering precariously in large piles as high as Hermione, while titles on the shelves were in incorrect locations or missing altogether.

Blaise managed to find two of their books and Harry another one; Hermione found the others and grabbed two for extra reading – as per her agreement with the Headmistress and her parents – and the three wasted no time in heading to the cashier.

Unfortunately, they were waylaid by Fred and George’s family; the Weasleys had chosen the same day to go school shopping.

“Hiya, Harry!” exclaimed the Twins in unison. “Fancy seeing you here today!”

Harry grinned back at the two, exchanging his own greeting. Blaise and Hermione enthusiastically welcomed them, as well.

“We’re here to get Gin-Gin’s school books,” said Fred with a smirk, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the shy redheaded girl in a jumper and skirt. She was hiding behind another tall, redheaded teenager while another redheaded boy stood protectively next to her. “It’s her first year at Hogwarts.”

“Congratulations to her,” offered Blaise, glancing her way and catching her eye. He gave a quick smile and nod.

She flushed and grabbed her brother’s shirt sleeve.

“Shy, isn’t she?” murmured Hermione lowly.

George frowned slightly. “She’s the only girl that family’s had in about four generations. Weasleys are unanimously male.”

“The more Weasley to go around, eh?” wryly asked Harry with a slight leer. Fred and George laughed loudly, while Blaise had fallen to floor from laughing so hard. Hermione, on the other hand, blushed a becoming pink that spread across her nose and cheeks and curled upward to her ears.

“Fred! George, dear,” called a motherly voice; Mrs. Weasley appeared at the Twins’ side and began to berate them. “I asked you two to watch Ron and Ginny; it seems that the two of you can’t even follow a simple request without going off and causing mischief.” She paused in her tirade and smiled sweetly down on the three unknown children with her babies. “And who are your friends?”

George gallantly bowed and gestured to Hermione and Blaise first; Harry knew he was leading up for a big “Harry Potter entrance” that the Twins loved to cause. “Mum, this is Hermione Granger and Blaise Zabini, second year students at Wyckham. Blaise is on our Quidditch team as a Chaser.”

Although tense at the name of a prominent, but neutral, Pureblood family, Molly Weasley offered a warm smile and greeted Hermione and Blaise pleasantly.

“And this, Mum,” finished Fred, “Is Harry Potter; Seeker for our Quidditch team and the Boy-Who-Lived!”

Unfortunately, a lull in the shop caused Fred’s voice to carry; an announcement that had just finished being made (“—pleasure to welcome Gilderoy Lockhart!”) and the attention was shifted from the celebrity to Harry Potter.

“Bless my soul,” breathed one patron.

“Mummy, look! It’s Harry Potter!”

Harry inwardly groaned; he hated his celebrity status. Luckily, Blaise and Hermione seemed used to it and managed to keep patrons at bay, but were not able to stop Harry from being bodily pulled toward the clear space in the store.

A tall, wavy blond haired man with fancy silk robes and even, white teeth smiled congenially at the crowd. He was holding onto Harry’s shoulders tightly, clasping the boy to his side.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began in a cultured voice, his blue eyes wide and innocent-looking. “Allow me to introduce myself for those of you who might not know who I am. I am Gilderoy Lockhart, winner of Witch Weekly’s Best Smile for five consecutive years. I am pleased to announce that I, for this year, will be Mr. Potter’s Defense Against the Dark Arts professor!”

“WHAT?” yipped Harry loudly, trying to wiggle away from Lockhart’s side. The man had pinned him to his lilac robes, grinning at the crowd and looking for a photo opportunity.

“Now, now,” smiled Lockhart, “As such, I will be giving you all my books for free, Harry! Signed and everything – as ‘Break With A Banshee’, ‘Gadding With Ghouls’, ‘Travel With Trolls’, ‘Voyages With Vampires’, ‘Wandering With Werewolves’, and ‘Year With The Yeti’ are required texts for Hogwarts!”

Harry could hear Blaise laughing over the din of the crowd. A store clerk dumped the six heavy books into Harry’s aching arms. Finally, after trying to catch Lockhart’s attention, Harry bellowed, “I DON’T ATTEND HOGWARTS!!”

The crowd silenced. Lockhart looked confused, as though no one had ever yelled at him before.

“I beg your pardon?” the man asked, bewildered, instead.

"I don't attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" gasped out Harry, glancing wildly around. "I go to Wyckham Academy! I've never attended a single class at Hogwarts!"

Lockhart looked stunned and then smiled in apology. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter – I was working on Year with the Yeti these past few years and hadn't known of a new wizarding school! I'm sure that you would love to be at Hogwarts this year, just to have old Gilderoy Lockhart as your professor!"

"No," muttered Harry under his breath, but plastered a fake smile on his face; he knew how to play the media when he had to. "Absolutely. I'm sure you'll be very loved there. Now, I really must be going... shopping for school and all that..."

Harry began to walk bow-legged toward the Weasleys, Hermione and Blaise, the heavy books still in his arms. He ended up dumping them in a cauldron that was at the girl Weasley's feet.

"I don't need those," said Harry, "If they are needed for Hogwarts, then you'd best have them."

Molly Weasley began to fret. "But, Harry, dear..."

Harry waved off the Weasley matriarch and shook his head. "I wouldn't have bought them, and would end up returning them anyway... and I'd rather they go to someone who actually needs it. It saves you some money, Mrs. Weasley – why not buy your daughter a nice set of robes for Hogwarts instead? I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

Mrs. Weasley squished Harry to her bosom unexpectedly. After a heartbeat, she released the flustered preteen. "You're such a good dear!"

She then turned away to help her older son with his purchase, leaving Harry with Hermione, Blaise, the Twins, the Weasley girl and her older brother: a gangly, freckled boy who hadn't grown into his arms and legs yet.

“Blaise! Harry!” called a new voice. The two turned to see Draco Malfoy, a childhood friend of Blaise’s and an acquaintance of Harry’s, stride toward them, coming down for Flourish and Blotts second floor.

“Hello Draco,” said a polite Harry as soon as the blond reached them. “Have you met our friend, Hermione Granger?”

Draco narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to say something – possible blood related – but a nudge from Blaise and a narrowing of the eyes from Harry stopped him. Instead, he mumbled out, “Charmed, I’m sure,” and held out his hand to Hermione. She shook it but they dropped their hands right away with the briefest of contact; Hermione knew Malfoy was a blood purist but more importantly, still listening to his father without question.

“Weasleys,” Draco sneered at the redheads instead. His mood seemed to perk up with the thought of tormenting the poor family.

“Malfoy,” hissed out the gangly teen in response.

“Harry, and Blaise,” inserted a wry Harry. “Now that we know who everyone is, we can continue on our merry way.”

“How’s that hovel you’re living in Weasley? Still sleeping on the dirt floor?”

“Why you—!”

Blaise rolled his eyes and moved to pull Draco back when they were interrupted again.

“Draco, who are your... friends?”

Lucius Malfoy, Draco’s father, stood directly behind Harry. The Twins remained silent; they were not at Hogwarts and did not take part of the Weasley-Malfoy war, but did take offense at the comments being thrown by the younger troublemaker. However, they also knew that words were just words, and that their younger brother had anger issues.

“Father,” greeted Draco cordially. “I believe you know Blaise Zabini and Harry Potter.” The older Malfoy nodded kindly at the two boys. “And this is their other... friend, Hermione Granger.”

“Delighted,” the man all but purred. Hermione nodded back and murmured something unintelligibly, but it passed inspection because Lucius Malfoy’s gaze landed on the Weasleys.

“Another Weasley starting at Hogwarts? Are there any left at your home or are you now all infected Hogwarts’ glorious walls?”

The younger Weasley male bristled again, and moved to say something when a freckled hand landed on his shoulder.

“All right, boys?”

Ah, so this is Mr. Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. Let’s see if this feud transcends generations, thought Harry, mildly amused.

The older Weasley and Malfoy looked at each other steadily over their children’s heads, before Mr. Weasley nicely said, “Hello, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Arthur,” sneered Lucius. It was clear that Lucius Malfoy considered the Weasley’s to be blood traitors, a disgrace to the nobility lines of the wizard world (especially as the Malfoy’s were rated as Lords and the Zabini head, Blaise’s Grandfather, was a Conte).

So caught up in his thoughts of where he stood as an heir to the Potter line (especially a Duke), he missed the next few lines of dialogue between the elder Weasley and Malfoy until Lucius stumbled back and Arthur Weasley was nursing a sore knuckle.

Immediately, his youngest son jumped the Malfoy heir.

“Oh, hell,” came Blaise’s voice next to his ear.

In the scuffle, Harry saw Lucius trip over the cauldron Harry dumped the free Lockhart books in, and then righted himself. Blaise and

Hermione pulled Draco away from the young Weasley, while the Twins held the spitting redhead back.

Harry knew something had to happen; the Weasleys were considered “Common” while the Malfoys and Zabini held rank. Harry hated to use his own rank to end a dispute, but if he did, both would thank him later for not getting their names in the Daily Prophet.

So, Harry drew himself up to his full height (which wasn’t impressive) and let his magic feed his aura as his anger spiked. “If you two gentlemen are quite finished,” he said coolly and softly.

Lucius Malfoy recognized Harry’s ranking and drew himself up. “I bid your forgiveness, your Grace.”

Harry nodded his head back and turned to look at a flabbergasted Arthur Weasley. “Such brawls between two upstanding wizards should be kept in words only – I highly doubt either of you would appreciate your name being attached to such a lowly, common Muggle fistfight in tonight’s Evening Prophet.”

Lucius Malfoy nodded, touched his son’s shoulder and the two bid Harry and Blaise a warm goodbye, a nod to Hermione, and sniff, slight bend of the neck to the Weasleys.

“What was that?” gapped the youngest son.

Fred cuffed him on the back of his head. “Haven’t you ever read Nature’s Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy?”

“No!” the teen rubbed his sore head and glared at his brother. “Why would I? I know we’re not in it.”

The girl spoke up in a soft voice. “There are still families that have titles, Ron.”

Ah, a name! thought Harry.

Ron scowled. “Well, we aren’t in it, so who cares?”

Arthur ignored his son and smiled at Harry. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. I would not like to explain to my boss tomorrow about why I got into a fight with Lucius Malfoy, model wizard citizen."

Ron's jaw dropped.

"It's okay, Mr. Weasley," smiled Harry back, "Malfoy's a smarmy git anyway, and I would've ended up doing the same had I the chance... but I'd rather not have anyone's name be slandered by the Prophet. I quite dislike their journalistic methods."

"Why are you apologizing to him?" gapped Ron. "He's friends with Malfoy!"

Blaise coughed.

Hermione spoke up, "Harry's a Duke in wizard nobility; his rank is second only to a King, if the wizard world still had one. Of course, the Pendragon line has long died out and the Wizengamot has been around since the last heir died off, so in essence, Harry is the ruling body. His word is law."

"Thanks, Hermione. I wanted everyone to know that." Harry rolled his eyes and turned to Blaise. "Shall we continue shopping? We need to go to Bloomsbury in London proper and I only have two more hours before I'm meeting up with Robert to take me back home."

Blaise nodded, and the two boys waved goodbye to the Weasley family, Hermione trailing after them, reminding them about what they still needed to buy.

As they left the store, Harry could have sworn he heard the Weasley girl say loudly now that he was gone, "He's rather cute!" and Ron replying, "Don't even think it!"

Harry smirked.

On September second, Robert, Heather, and Holly saw Wyckham Academy for the first time when driving Harry to Brighton.

The Woolworth's ooh'ed and ahh'ed over the grandeur of the school, the carefully landscaped grounds, and enquired about the location of classes and Harry's favourite haunts. They would be spending the afternoon with Harry to help him unpack his trunk, while Sean was already in class at Charterhouse School in Godalming, Surrey.

Harry learned early on at the Woolworth residence that the Dursley's had prided themselves on being fairly well-off (upper middle class family with a nice new car every three years or so, the newest toys and clothing fads for Dudley), the Woolworth's were easily middle upper class in wealth.

Harry arrived at his dorm room before Blaise (who would come through the Floo later that evening, after one last homemade dinner), and showed his foster parents around the campus until the dinner bell rang. The Woolworth's left after meeting Anita Hartz briefly (something about making sure Harry was happy and being taken care of), and secured a promise from Harry to write "at least once a week, if not twice!"

With Hermione across from him at the four-person table, and Dean beside him, Harry let out a happy sigh. While being at the Woolworth's was safe and comfortable, it was nice to be back at Wyckham Academy.

AN: I'm sorry for the long delay between this chapter and the last; I was getting ready for my third year at Uni, and then classes started – I've been quite knackered out since they began on Wednesday! And I haven't had a full week, yet... yikes! Why did I go into English as a major again? Oh yeah... I like to read.

I did a LOT of research for this chapter. So, without delay:

As far as I know, there were no advanced technology companies in Britain that were aligned with CERN. I just needed to give Robert

Woolworth a very high paying job in the 1990s. (in 1991, CERN released the first version of the World Wide Web, so I'm giving Robert Woolworth an "in" on the upcoming technology)

Because of his job, the Woolworth's can afford to send their foster son, Sean, to Charterhouse School. Located in Godalming, Surrey, Charterhouse School is similar to Eton College – a prestigious private school with tuition and boarding fees being something around £25,000+ annually. The Woolworth's give their children – foster and real – the best money can buy.

Wyckham's phone number was researched and although I did NOT find the area code and listing for a Brighton number, I did find Ofcom's website that listed "fake" numbers that British sitcoms use.

The large quantity of books listed in the Wyckham booklist are books that JKR has mentioned in either interviews, in the series, or from the films. I decided to add in the Wyckham booklist because readers didn't get a chance to see it first year and to be honest, I wanted a filler chapter. Some names are made up; others come directly from the wonderful website The Harry Potter Lexicon. My savior!

While the next part of Wyckham's Harry Potter story will be similar to the Chamber of Secrets storyline, this year will primarily focus on Harry and his friends, the skills they will learn in class, Quidditch games, football, and a few crazy stunts. I want to work on characterization and go from there... any comments, questions, concerns can be left in reviews, PMs, or emails. :) A new chapter should appear within the next two weeks... give or take what books will be assigned for me to read in the coming week, or what assignments will be asked to prepare and hand in. Already I need to read The Wizard of Oz for Friday's "Filming Literature" course! Eek! Wish me luck! – Kneazle Sept.09.06

Chapter Ten

The first day of second year began with dusky gray skies and a threat of rain in the air, on September 7th.

Harry woke up with a smile on his face and was greeted with the sounds of Blaise snoring. His best friend was on his bed at the other side of the room, arms and legs out from under the covers and lying on his back, mouth wide open.

Shaking his head, Harry gathered his clothing and a towel, and shut off his alarm; he then left the room in his pajamas and slippers, heading to the men's bathroom.

Ernie McMillan and Wayne Hopkins were already there; Ernie, brushing his teeth, and Wayne dripping wet in flip-flops from just having to take a shower.

"Morning Harry," the two boys greeted. "How was your summer?" continued Wayne.

While Harry wasn't good friends with the rest of the students in his year as he was with his "new Age" Marauders, he was on friendly terms with them.

Ernie was a shy, pale and freckled boy with a short cap of curly, dirty brown hair. He was skinny and gangly, but next to Harry, they were the shortest boys in the year. Wayne, on the other hand, was nearly as tall as Dean – who was the tallest in their year – and an American-Britain. He was affectionately nicknamed "Army" due to his father's status as a General in the Air Force. Harry thought that Wayne would soon be able to try out for the rugby team, as his shoulders were getting much wider and because he was a bit heavier than most twelve-year-olds.

"It was a lot better than the one's before it," quipped Harry.

"We heard a rumor going 'round that you left your Aunt and Uncle?" asked Ernie, hesitantly.

Harry nodded, hanging up his towel and removing his slippers (the bathrooms were very hygienic). "Hartz brought me to her office to talk about it. There was a court trial and everything... but, long story short, I'm a lot happier now with the Woolworth's."

"That's good to hear," smiled Wayne, brushing his own teeth. Ernie waited for his friend.

"Oh, by the way Harry," said Ernie suddenly, looking at their famous friend, who was now testing the temperature for his shower.

"What?"

"There's this... uh, first year..." Ernie paused. "I think he's a bit obsessed with you."

"What?"

Wayne suddenly started choking on his toothpaste, trying hard to stop laughing. Ernie blushed, slapping his friend on his back and then continued, "He's this mousy little kid with big eyes... read a ton of history books 'cause he's a Muggleborn. Of course, you're in nearly every one and so... well..."

Harry groaned, and jumped into the shower. Ernie continued but Harry heard every word over the water.

"He has a camera, Harry. He really loves photography, so I'm sure he'll want to take a few pictures of you or something..."

Still laughing, Wayne and Ernie left the men's room.

Harry's first class that morning was English with Professor Hartz. She wouldn't expect them to read anything; rather, they would do a review.

To Harry though, the halls between classes seemed smaller and there seemed to be more students than last year. When he voiced this, Blaise and Neville nodded along as well.

“Do we know how many Yearlings there are?” asked Dean with a grin on his face as three much smaller first year students ran by to class, laughing.

Hermione frowned at the unknown word but shrugged – it seemed that her friends wanted to come up with some cool ‘Wyckham’ terms to differentiate themselves from other schools.

Inside the classroom, Harry and his friends said hello with the other students and caught up. Lisa Turpin and Steven Cornfoot congratulated Harry for his end-of-the-school year romp at Hogwarts, in which Harry didn’t know whether to act bashful for their praise or annoyed that they brought it up.

Soon, Hartz arrived and they settled into their desks.

She began with a review of last years’ material. Once they had finished that, she sat at the edge of her desk and crossed her arms over her body.

Harry always thought that beyond being a very kind and considerate person, Anita Hartz was fairly young and good-looking as well (he and Blaise once speculated whether or not she was married or involved with someone). She had curly, shoulder-length brown hair – similar to Hermione’s but much tamer... possibly like how Hermione’s would turn out one day – and brown eyes. But it was the way she held herself – with confidence – that held students’ and professors’ attention.

Today she wore a fashionable pant suit and low, pointy-toed heels. She looked at ease at the front of their class, and approachable; there were, however, slight wrinkles at the corner of her eyes and around her mouth. They were much more pronounced today.

“I want to talk to you lot about something,” she began, in a friendly tone.

The class shuffled into their seats more comfortably and was attentive.

“As you well know, Wyckham doesn’t have houses like Hogwarts to divide you all into, and we have completely different courses. However, we’re finding ourselves at a bit of a loss.” She stood and began to pace in front of her desk.

“As of this morning, there are 34 first year students. There are only 11 of you. There are 27 third year students, and 24 fourth years. There are 19 fifth year students and the majority of you know the 26 sixth year students. The seventh years have the least, at only 9. And I’m not including the 8 optional year students who practically live in the labs in the basement complex doing experiments and writing their theses.

“We find that the student population has grown from the original 92 we had when we opened to 150 as of this morning. Not a very significant increase, but notable, as many are transfers to this school after what occurred at Hogwarts last June.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Professor,” began Su Li quietly, with her arm raised, “But what does that have to do with us? And why wasn’t this announced at breakfast?”

Hartz sighed and rubbed her temples. “I couldn’t announce it at breakfast because it doesn’t involve the entire school, just your year and the first years. And it is important – once I get to my point...”

Harry smiled. Hartz did have a problem of using too many words when she could break it down into smaller, less complex, ones.

“Okay, here’s the deal: Wyckham doesn’t have prefects. However, the professors and I agree that with the school growing larger it would be a good idea to have older students that the younger ones can go to when they need help. The professors who have the sixth and seventh year students with them are saying the same thing. Those who have done the best academically, socially and manage to participate in extracurricular will be chosen to become prefects.

“What I want from you is for you to take three first years under your wing and show them around school; one of you will have a fourth, but it won’t be too much trouble. You’ll be their older sibling, taking care of them, making sure they’re feeling at home and no one is picking on them.”

The class was silent. None of them had expected that of all things.

“Will you do this?” Hartz asked, looking out at the twelve year olds. “I know it’s a lot of responsibility, and that you’re all so young still... but we’re going to need help in the coming years if there was a jump of 55 or so every year in newcomers.”

“I’ll do it,” Harry heard himself say, standing up from his seat. Immediately, Blaise jumped up. Hermione and Neville took a bit longer, but they followed Harry’s example.

A few seconds after them, Susan, Dean, Ernie, Lisa and Steven all proclaimed, “I’ll do it!” together.

The rest of the class followed.

Hartz was visibly relieved, and smiled genially at her students. “Thank you. I’ll be giving you the names of your first years by the end of tonight.”

The bell rang, signaling the end of class and the second year students gathered their notebooks and pens and left to go to History, in a rush of blue and black.

At lunch, Harry, Dean, Neville and Susan decided to relax while Blaise and Hermione began to make out study schedules. Professors were already letting students know of assignment due dates, causing much worry with the not-so-good students.

However, Blaise and Hermione’s study schedules (made for everyone in their year, as it was easy to just make one together and

make duplicates with a nifty charm) were followed religiously and most managed to pass their courses with at least a C.

Harry was talking to Dean about the football team, and how he was on a summer team, when a flash went off directly in his eyes.

“What the hell?” blubbered Harry, blinking his eyes hard and hoping the spots would disappear.

“Hello, Harry!” chirped a young voice.

Harry glanced to his right to see a mousy young boy – he was the first year Ernie had warned him about.

“Er... hello,” began Harry, politely. He glanced down at the boy’s camera. “Photographer, are you?”

The boy beamed. “Oh, yes! And even since I read about you, and heard the other students talk about what you did to You-Know-Who, I just had to get your pictures to send back to my little brother!”

Harry gulped. “Did you now?”

Dean snickered, and Harry shot him a glare. Neville joined in with Dean, chuckling quietly beneath their hands.

“Oh, yeah,” nodded the boy. “I’m Colin Creevey, by the way, Harry! Would I be able to get another photo of you?”

Harry was torn; the kid was obviously nice but a little over the top. Perhaps he could be nice but steer him away...

“How about later, Colin? Like, when there aren’t any classes coming up. You wouldn’t want someone to get hurt because of that flash causing them to see spots, would you? They might not be able to perform in class.”

Colin looked down at his camera in shock. “I hadn’t thought of that. I’m sorry, Harry! You’re all right, though, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded solemnly, trying to not twitch his lips into a smile. "I'm quite fine, Colin."

Colin bit his lip and nodded. "I am very sorry."

"It's okay, really."

With a smaller, hesitant smile, Colin thanked Harry. E waved goodbye and made his way to where his friends sat at another table, at the other side of the Café.

"Whew," deadpanned Harry, pretending to wipe a bead of sweat away.

"Well done!" applauded Blaise, having looked up at the flash. "But that won't stop him."

Harry sighed. "I know. But that doesn't mean that I shouldn't have tried to stop him."

After a mentally exhausting Defense class, with Mondays emphasizing theory and a grueling hour of gym class, Harry happily snoozed for an hour in a quiet dorm room. Blaise and Hermione were already beginning to study and review the new material covered in class, so Harry was grateful for the peace and quiet of the room.

He napped for an hour or so, until the dinner bell; grumbling slightly, he stretched and left the dorm room, noticing a white envelope on the floor of their hallway. It had his and Blaise's name written in black ink.

Shrugging, Harry took it with him to the Café, ready to eat his fill.

Susan and Dean were already there, having saved a spot for Harry at their table. When Harry mentioned the envelope, Susan and Dean confirmed they both received one as well.

"Open it up; it has the names of your 'Yearlings'," said Susan, rolling her eyes at Dean's new word.

So, Harry did so. On one piece of thick paper was Blaise's name at the top right, with a list of three students, their ages and birthdays, and a few other facts about them.

Harry, unfortunately, was the student who received four first years.

Harry J. Potter

Second Year, 1992-1993

Colin Creevey

- Age: 11

- Birthday: March 6

- Muggleborn student; father is a milkman and has one younger brother who shows magical talent. Favourite colour is blue, and enjoys taking photos with the camera his Grandmother gave him for his eleventh birthday.

Donald Grove

- Age: 10

- Birthday: October 23

- Half-blood student; his father is a wizard and mother non-magical. He is an only child who grew up knowing about magic. He enjoys Quidditch and his parents say that he is an 'adrenaline junkie'.

Luna Lovegood

- Age: 11

- Birthday: April 24

- Pureblood student; her father is the owner and contributor to the alternative wizard newspaper, the Quibbler, and her mother, who

tragically passed away three years ago, was a Charms expert for the Department of Mysteries. Luna may seem odd, but she has a good head on her shoulders and quite an imagination.

Jens von Strassen

- Age: 11

- Birthday: August 30

- Muggleborn student; his parents are originally from Austria, but they moved to England, as his father is a movie director and his mother works for the government in their transportation department. Henry is a very creative individual who carries around his sketch book and is quite fond of doing things that are out of the ordinary.

Please come to the Café at 7pm, Friday evening. The first years and second years have a free timeslot on their schedules. Afterward, you may show your charges around the school or visit the Cinema in the Auditorium for Friday's movie night, which will be "Batman."

Harry – I decided that you would be the best to handle four students rather than Blaise or Hermione because of your obvious leadership skills and talent for making people feel at ease. Should there be any problem, please do not hesitate to tell me so.

Hartz

Harry wasn't sure what his reaction ought to be; he wanted to groan for getting Colin Creevey and three others as his charges, but he was also a bit excited to help out the younger students. No one had helped him in elementary school when Dudley was bullying him. He wanted to make sure no one did to his charges.

An odd feeling was in Harry's chest. It wasn't until dinner was over and he was walking back to Neville and Dean's room that he placed the feeling.

It was the need to protect and care for someone other than himself, and knowing that there would be someone students could go to for

help. It made him wish there had been someone for him, all those years ago.

The first week of classes went by quickly and Harry soon found himself with his friends in the Café, Friday evening. He and his friends sat at their table and amused themselves with Neville's Exploding Snap card game until Anita Hartz walked in with Blake.

The 34 first years shuffled in shyly, rubbing their noses or looking at the floor. Harry recognized Colin Creevey and the rather bulky camera he had around his neck. It wasn't until Hartz cleared her throat that everyone turned to look at her.

"Hi everyone," she began, speaking loudly. The few stragglers who crept in to the Café just as she spoke sheepishly sat at the nearest table they could find; Harry saw it was Su Li and Wayne Hopkins.

"Thanks for coming," Hartz continued, eyeing the newcomers before turning back to the crowd. "As you see in front of you, there are thirty-four students who will be partnered up with you." She turned to look at the pale first years. "When I say your name, step forward. Your second year partners will then stand and direct you to a table so that you can get to know each other. What happens afterward is up to you."

A few brave first years nodded or murmured something of acceptance, but most stood stock-still. Harry wondered if it was because this was the first time many were away from their parents and friends, or if it because they were being singled out.

"Masumi Adzuki, Fritz Darcy and Vaughan Kelly," called out Hartz. An Asian girl with long, long inky black hair stepped forward and two scrubby-looking boys with brown hair vaguely made themselves known. Wayne stood up and waved at them. They walked over to his table and began to talk softly.

“Constance Armageddon, Henri Montreal, Romeo Ignatius.” They walked to Neville, who then waved goodbye to his friends and headed for a corner of the Café.

“Eleanor Osborne, Leif Zinger, Audrey Taylor.” Hermione stood, whispered a goodbye, and greeted her first years with a wide smile and chatter. The two girls were complete opposites: one blonde, the other black-haired, the blonde one short and the black-haired one tall. The boy was tall and all grins; he had an ear piercing as well.

Blaise stood when “Anatol Behr, Abigail Hamilton and Meredith Rowantree” were called, and exuberantly began to tell them about Quidditch and when they glanced Harry’s way, about the Boy-Who-Lived as well.

Arnold Byes, Jordan Fonda and Morgan Newberry teamed up with Susan; Dean was with Edmund Courtney, Zoë Lightfoot and Leonard Wallace.

Ernie McMillan paired up with Sarah Fawcett, Ambrose Everhard and Gertrude Riley; Steven Cornfoot with Seraphina Hobbins (whose older brother was in the Weasley Twin’s year), Regan Kendall and Horatio Perez; Su Li took under her wing Sayid Jihad, Catriona MacLean and Sorchia Winthrow while Lisa Turpin smiled widely at Albert Prince, Ivan Schaffer and Sabrina Uri.

Colin, Donald, Jens and Luna made their way to the large table Harry sat at alone.

“Hi Harry!” exclaimed Colin breathlessly. He had his hero looking out for him. Harry gave a weak smile in return.

“Hi, Colin,” rejoined Harry with a pained twist of the lips. He glanced at the other three with him.

Obviously, the long, blonde-haired girl with wide blue eyes and the wand stuck behind her ear was Luna Lovegood. She had Coke bottle caps strung around her neck and turnip-earrings hanging from her lobes. Her uniform was a bit sloppy, and instead of the normal blue

knee-socks the girls were to wear, she had on rainbow coloured striped ones.

“Luna Lovegood?” Harry asked of her, pointing with his finger. She nodded, beaming happily at him, at the table, at her year mates, and everything in between.

“Right...” Harry turned to the last two boys. “Now, which one is which?”

“I’m Don,” said a boy who was rocking back and forth on his heels. He had short-cropped brownish red hair and a stub nose. His hands were in his trouser pockets, but when he brought one out to shake Harry’s hand, Harry saw that it was shaking.

Adrenaline junkie, indeed, he thought with amusement. This kid will enjoy Quidditch.

“And you’re Jens then,” finished Harry, looking at the stoic blonde with blue eyes next to Colin. Harry found this odd, but then shrugged it off; Jens probably wasn’t used to the boarding school life and found himself in solitude more often than not. Harry also spied a small sketch book under his arm and an HB pencil tucked into a trouser pocket.

“Right. So, I’m Harry Potter,” began Harry.

“Is that your full name?” asked Luna suddenly, in a dreamy voice.

Harry floundered. “Er... pardon?”

“Your full name? Aren’t you the Defeater of the Dark Lord as well?”

Harry felt a twinge of amusement. “Um, no, actually. Not yet, at least. I’m still the Boy-Who-Lived and haven’t even defeated my roommate in a pillow fight.”

“So what is your full name, Harry?” asked Don with wide eyes, his body trembling.

Sighing, Harry told them. "It's Lord Harry James Potter, the Duke of Ashbourne, Boy-Who-Lived."

"Cool," breathed Jens, staring at Harry in a new light. In a flash, his sketchbook was out and his pencil was moving against the paper.

Oh, bugger, thought Harry in dismay. What have I done?

"Do we call you 'Your Grace' when we want to address you?" asked Don.

"Um, no," replied a startled Harry. "I'm only twelve!"

Hoping to diffuse what could potentially become a school-wide rumor, Harry clapped his hands together and asked instead, "So, how about we go to the Quidditch Pitch and I show you around the school from there, hmm?"

Don was all for it; Jens continued to scrutinize Harry and went along with whatever he wanted to do because he was close to his subject; Colin was eager to spend time with the Boy-Who-Lived and take pictures, and Luna didn't say anything.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and sighed, "I guess we're to the pitch."

The Quidditch pitch and football field were alight with flood lights; a few of the older students were playing scrimmages, but Harry and his Yearlings ignored them and walked around the grounds.

Finally, Harry settled his Yearlings at his spot – the large oak tree nearby a manmade pond on the school grounds, hidden close to the edge of the property.

Jens continued to sketch Harry, but was now taking in the surroundings and incorporating them to his work. He was rather quite but got along fine with the other three, especially Don who was overly

interested in Jens' creative ideas – “skateboarding” and “ramps” was all that Harry caught.

Colin used up the film from his camera and had pouted for about ten minutes before asking Harry a bunch of questions that he was more than happy to answer. Luna quietly hummed next to him, happy to just part be of anything.

They sat under the tree, in the dark. Harry took out his wand and said, “Listen up; I’m going to teach you a nifty spell for when you’re in the dark.”

“Like Lumos?” asked Don, wary. They had learned that spell earlier in the week and it was obvious Don wasn’t too impressed.

“Nope,” grinned Harry. He murmured something under his breath, his hand empty and outstretched. Almost immediately, a light blue fire burst into life, hovering above his palm.

Jens yelped in surprise and Colin breathed, “Doesn’t that hurt?”

Luna’s dreamy eyes took in the bluebell flame and said, “I doubt it hurts any more than being stomped upon by the Crumple-Horned Snorkrack.”

Harry’s smile froze and he turned to Luna. I suppose this is what Hartz meant as “may seem odd” and “has quite an imagination”, he thought wryly. He nodded at her, as though agreeing, without voicing his opinions.

“It doesn’t hurt. It’s warm, and tingly, but better than the Lumos spell because you can carry this around and it won’t ever go out,” explained Harry. “Consider it a portable torch, without actually having a torch on you.”

“Neat!” exclaimed Don. “What’s the incantation?”

“Lacarnum Inflamarae,” instructed Harry. “No wand movements, just the spell and the intent... which you’ll get into in later years. Schmidt just touched on magical theory briefly in our class this morning.”

The four began to practice the spell, saying the incantation. After a few minutes, they all managed to create a hovering ball of fire.

“You can go to the kitchens and ask for an empty jar,” suggested Harry, “and recast the spell with you wand tip just above the jar. You’ll get a permanent bluebell fire in it, then.”

“And how do we get rid of the spell now, Duke?” asked Luna pleasantly.

Harry hesitated, completely floored. Duke? She’s calling me DUKE?

“Um...” began Harry slowly. “You just close your palm. It’ll douse the flame.”

“This is brilliant!” exclaimed Colin eagerly. “Thanks for showing it to us!”

Jens and Don, though, were looking at Luna as though she were a genius. They turned back to Harry and a grin broke across both their faces.

Oh, no. I have a feeling I won’t like this at all.

Harry was right; Don and Jens immediately began to call Harry ‘Duke.’ It seemed that Luna had created Harry’s first nickname and it stuck with the Yearlings. It would be all over the school by dinner Sunday evening.

“Right, guys,” Harry finally said. “Let’s head back to the dorms. Tomorrow the clubs and teams have their annual showcase. I’ll see you lot there, hopefully – and should you want to try out for a reserve on a Quidditch team or the football team, know that you’ll be playing against me as a first string player on both teams.”

As they reached the school, Harry saw his other schoolmates leading their own Yearlings about the grounds, and back inside to their rooms. Harry added, “My room is located on the second floor in the East Wing; it’s the third door on the left. My name is on a plaque hanging

outside the room, so you can't miss it. You can come to me at any time if you need homework help or just want to hang out."

"Thanks, Duke!" the four chimed in together. Luna was the only one who hummed a cheery, unknown melody after speaking.

Harry wanted to groan but didn't dare do so in front of the younger students. He left them in the Commons, where they broke off and went their separate ways. Harry returned to his room, seating himself on his desk chair and pulling out the Business Case and ledger. He had been neglecting his duties.

Thirty minutes later, Blaise walked in, a perplexed look on his face.

Harry looked up at him, and asked, "What's up?"

Blaise scratched his head and tilted it to the side. "Can you explain to me why all the Yearlings are calling you 'Duke'?"

Harry's head hit his desktop.

On Sunday, Hermione was off for her horseback riding lessons, leaving Harry, Blaise, Neville, Dean and Susan to ponder what they'd do for her thirteenth birthday.

"It's a Friday night," offered Dean thoughtfully, before moving on to the topic of birthday cards. "I can make a large card for her, and have schoolmates sign it, and make a more individual one from all of us."

"D'you think Hartz will let us go to Brighton for the evening?" asked Neville.

"Not a chance," shot back Susan, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. "Besides," she added, "Hermione doesn't like too much attention drawn to her unless it's about schoolwork."

Harry drummed his fingers on the Café table they were seated at. "Well, we know she likes books. What else?"

“Horseback riding,” snorted Blaise, as though it were obvious.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, that too.”

“She likes flowers.”

“And challenges.”

“Maybe we can get her a Rubik’s Cube or a large puzzle?”

“Where’d she have the time to finish a puzzle? And where would she put it?” countered Neville.

“What about jewelry?”

“Too girly,” Susan sighed, “Hermione’s not interested in frilly stuff... not yet at least.”

Harry frowned, running a hand through his hair in agitation. “Okay, fine, let’s drop what we know she likes. What doesn’t she like, instead?”

“Heights,” the group replied in unison. They laughed.

“So, no amusement parks or brooms then,” smiled Harry. He leaned back in his chair, loosening his tie. Blaise was impeccable as ever, without a wrinkle and leaning over a textbook; Susan’s socks were wrinkled and scrunched near her ankles but she look pretty as ever. Dean and Neville were both slightly dirty: Dean with paint smudges along his fingers and side of his hand and Neville with dirt smudges on his cheek and under his nails.

“What about a pet?” asked Blaise suddenly. “She’s been using Marius and Hedwig to send her parent’s letters since we began here.”

“Then she won’t need an owl, she’ll just use ours anyway,” Harry shook his head. “But she is a cat person, isn’t she? I’ve seen her coo over Penelope Clearwater’s Persian.”

“So... we get her a gift certificate to Magical Menagerie?” asked Neville slowly. “Because I don’t think she’d like us too much if we pick out a pet specifically for her and she doesn’t like the furball.”

Blaise laughed. “Why not? I’ll ask Mum to go over and pick a kitten out for Hermione. I’m sure she’ll like anything we give her, because it’s a birthday present. We’ll leave the option open that if she doesn’t want the kitty, we can give it to someone else who will take good care of it.”

“It does solve that problem,” admitted Susan, “And I can’t bring my Puffskein here anyway, so there’s no worry that my pet and hers will fight.”

“So... we’ve decided?” Harry asked finally. When everyone nodded, he turned to Blaise. “Ask your mum to pick up a cat and we’ll all split the cost between ourselves. We ought to include food and a collar as well, maybe even some toys.”

Blaise nodded, and pulled out a lined piece of paper and began to draft a letter to his mother.

As the others got up and left, going off to the library or to club meetings, Harry turned to Blaise and added, “Don’t forget to write that I say hello, Blaise!”

Harry’s best friend rolled his eyes and asked, “Now, why would I forget to do something like that, you prat?”

Harry grinned and walked off to join the football team holding reserve tryouts.

On September 19th, Harry and his friends did not say ‘Happy birthday’ to Hermione, even though it was obvious that they knew it was her special day: other students came up and wished Hermione the best.

By that evening, Hermione was flustered, confused and a little bit angry, but more so, incredibly hurt by her friends.

It wasn't until they refused to go down to the Café for dinner that she snapped. "FINE!" she shouted, "See if I care! If you really were my friends you would have wished me a happy birthday by now!"

A stricken Blaise glanced at Harry who smiled gently at Hermione and hugged her. The girl was stiff in his arms, but then relaxed and mumbled, "Why haven't you said anything?"

Harry pulled back and fished his handkerchief out of his pocket. "We didn't forget, Hermione."

"What?" the girl asked, blankly.

"C'mon, we have something to show you!" Harry led her to Blaise, who wrapped an arm around her shoulders and directed her to the Auditorium. The movie showing was already over, and those who watched the film were back in their dorms or the Common.

When the new Marauders entered, Hermione gasped.

The room was dim, but she could see that a huge banner had been placed across one wall, stating boldly: HAPPY BIRTHDAY HERMIONE!! At the bottom of the Auditorium, on the stage, was a table of her favourite food and a giant, three-tier chocolate cake.

"We're going to watch your favourite movie and eat dinner and have cake and a bunch of junk food," explained Neville happily.

Dean added, "And don't worry about the junk food, we spoke to your parents and they assured us that one day of junk won't kill us or ruin our teeth, as long as we floss and brush extra hard tonight!"

Hermione gave a half-laugh, half-sob and hugged all of her friends, equally as hard.

"Thank you!" she whispered out, as they settled around her in their seat. On the screen, Casablanca began. "Thank you all, so much!"

At the end of the film, the dinner was consumed and cake was eaten; they had opened two bags of chips and dip, and were guzzling down Cokes and root beer. The Wyckham house elves appeared and shooed them out, so they could clean (although they hadn't made too much of a mess), and Susan informed Hermione that they weren't done yet.

In Hermione and Susan's room, Hermione found her bed filled with birthday presents.

From her parents, she received new clothes, four new fictional books, and a telescope. Her grandparents sent her beautiful emerald earrings that Hermione reverently placed in her jewelry box.

"Now," said Harry, sliding out a large box from under the bed, "Our present to you, from all of us."

"But first – the cards!" Dean exclaimed, handing Hermione two envelopes: a small one and a large one the size of Harry's chest.

Hermione opened the large one first, laughing at her classmates, professors and her Yearlings' signatures and birthday wishes. The smaller card was more intimate, and immortalized Hermione's first reactions to Diagon Alley (from Neville and Harry), Wyckham (from Susan), the library (from Blaise) and her classes (from Dean). The text was a lengthy letter but it filled Hermione's eyes with tears and gratitude for her friends.

"Now, the smaller box," offered Blaise happily, plunking it down on her lap.

Hermione gingerly opened it, saving the bow, and pulled out a collar with a bell on it. "Should I be amused?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Her friends laughed and she dug out a catnip mouse and scratching post, looking more and more stumped as each new item was pulled out.

"I'm so confused!" she finally burst out in frustration. Susan giggled and the boys chuckled happily.

Finally, Harry pushed the larger box to Hermione carefully. "Don't shake it!" he warned.

"It was Harry's idea," inputted Neville helpfully; or rather, unhelpfully, in case Hermione did not like it.

Hermione's eyebrows disappeared under her fringe. She carefully took in the holes all over the box, and undid the bow at the top. She pulled off the lid, looked in and gasped.

A tiny 'meow' warbled from the box. Hermione reached in and pulled out a soft-furred, fluffy and shiny furred kitten. It was black with white on its paws, tail tip, and around its face and had eerie yellow eyes but was barely the size of her textbooks.

"He's yours, Hermione," said Blaise softly. Hermione looked up from the kitten in wonderment.

"From all of us," continued Harry, happy that his friend hadn't had a bad reaction to the kitten.

The kitten began to purr and Hermione softly ran her fingers down its back. "He's adorable."

At midnight, Harry, Blaise, Dean and Neville said goodnight and left Hermione's room.

While her friends went to bed and fell asleep, Hermione remained awake, with her new kitten curled up beside her on her bed.

"I think I'll call you Figaro," she murmured, "After the cat in Disney's Pinocchio. A story about a boy who dreamed of being real boy instead of a puppet. A story proving that Pinocchio can be brave, truthful, and unselfish and how he doesn't always get into trouble. Pinocchio is my friend, Harry; and I might be his Jiminy Cricket, and Hartz his Fairy. If that's so, then you are my Figaro."

Figaro purred, and Hermione yawned, falling asleep soon after, dreaming of her best friends, her birthday, and Figaro.

AN: Enjoy the new chapter! As you can see, it'll be more about Harry and the Wyckham students, rather than Hogwarts and him going off to save the day there.

This will probably be the last one for about a week and a half; assignment dates for essays have been given out and next week we get our topics. Eek. Now, off to read Mary Wollstonecraft's crappy "Vindication of Rights of Women," and other crappy 19th Century British authors. Blech! Let's not forget mein hausaufgaben! Three cheers for German grammar! –laughs–

Kneazle Sept.16.06

Chapter Eleven

October was chilly and morbid as the leaves on the trees surrounding the school began to change from dark and light greens to a variety of browns, oranges and gold.

Harry breathed in the cold air, breathing deeply and slowly. Classes were progressing quickly, with quizzes nearly every week and new material in every class.

Shacklebolt was driving them hard in their Defense class, moving on to harder spells like the theory behind a Patronus and mock duels every Wednesday. Those lessons had proved to be Harry's rise and downfall all in one: the Ashwinder was problematic, but everyone got over it (with a few well-placed threats to sue and one actual lawsuit) and Harry was suddenly the coolest kid on the block. However, it seemed that the Ashwinder wasn't a fluke.

Harry never had to work hard in Defense; he was a natural at it. His spells came effortlessly, he could remember the wand movements and incantations without trouble, and his essays were in-depth and as interesting as they could be, written by a twelve-year-old.

And yet, Harry was still easily pointed out for his reflexes and was always called upon to be Shacklebolt's sparring partner for mock duels. It was during one of those duels that Harry's magic decided to take another miraculous leap.

"Right," began Shacklebolt happily. "What we're going to do today is a fast-paced, heavy-duty mock duel. Harry, if you come over here... we'll demonstrate."

Blaise snickered from his side by Harry, pushing his friend gently toward the professor. Harry rolled his eyes but did as he was told.

"Wand at the ready?" asked Shacklebolt.

Harry nodded. His wand was held in the palm of his right hand (although Harry could duel just as effortlessly with his left, he

practiced wand movements with both), the end of the handle grip held loosely between his thumb and forefinger.

Harry presented only his side to Shacklebolt's face; his feet were planted apart and his head turned, facing his professor.

Shacklebolt nodded, pleased at Harry's dueling stance that was more similar to street fighting technique, and without warning, shot off a sickly green coloured spell at Harry, silently.

Harry inwardly cursed, but twirled his wand and snapped out, "Protego!"

Shacklebolt had already sent two other spells careening at Harry – each spell, in strength and colour, used a different shield to protect the wizard. With Shacklebolt silently casting spells, Harry couldn't predict what shield he ought to use. Using the strongest would weaken him eventually; using the weakest, like protego, would get him seriously injured.

Panic had set in. Harry's dueling ability came from running around, ducking, conjuring and shouting off spells as hard and fast as he could – daredevil like. Instead, Shacklebolt was forcing him to do something different, staying in place (which Harry thought was silly anyway, but went along with it).

As the spells came closer, Harry scrunched his eyes shut and thought desperately, A shield that can protect me, I need to strong shield that can protect me! His mind was chanting Protego! Protego! Protego! Over and over, but Harry was sure he'd end up in the hospital wing.

When nothing happened after several heartbeats, Harry opened one eye a bit; squinting. He opened another, amazed.

In front of him a blinding web-like light, spread across his body and around over top, like a semi-dome. It was pulsing and radiated protection – and magic.

Kingsley Shacklebolt's wand had fallen to the floor and his mouth was open.

"Holy hell," he breathed, causing Harry to audibly gulp.

"Professor?" asked Harry in a warbly voice.

Shacklebolt snapped out of his daze and smiled kindly at Harry. "All right, Potter, let's see how we can tackle this."

It took them twenty minutes with class suggestions on how to get Harry's impressive and original shield to collapse in a blinding burst of warm, white light that caressed everyone's faces.

When it was over, Shacklebolt ran a hand over his mouth and jaw, looked at Harry speculatively, and sighed. "Well, the good is that you've managed to wordlessly cast a spell. The bad part is I don't know what spell you cast."

And with thirty minutes left to the lesson, Shacklebolt had them finish stretching their muscles and dismissed them early. He was muttering under his breath "...damned confused... Department of Mysteries? No... amazing... but so damned confused..." long after the students had left.

Harry supposed he that could never just be a normal student. He would settle for being slightly above the ordinary, happy with his achievements (well, it was idealistic of him, but he rather thought that he'd still be bitter considering he was the Boy-Who-Lived).

During the summer, Heather Woolworth had bought Harry a CD walkman; with that and his new allowance money, Harry had gone out and bought a bunch of CDs to add to his U2 CD. He bought an Aphex Twin CD, and found that he quite enjoyed Massive Attack. Though he wouldn't tell anyone, Madonna's latest CD was fun to listen to, as well.

While Harry also enjoyed spending time with his friends, he did enjoy being alone as well. Too many people made him nervous, especially when they were worshipping him under his special status – he

constantly raised his eyes to the Heavens and thanked God that Colin Creevey had finally realized Harry was a mere mortal and stopped taking pictures of him.

Shivering slightly as another breeze brushed by him, Harry crossed his arms and shuffled in place, watching the pond's surface ripple.

Harry wondered when Dumbledore might need him again. Harry was sure the man wasn't done with his underhand manipulations – although he wouldn't try to manipulate Harry directly, he could always choose to do so indirectly through his friends or professors. Even the media or the Ministry could get in on it, and Harry wasn't keen on alienating the entire wizard world. However, considering the crap he went through with his Parseltongue ability coming to light, Rita Skeeter's probing questions, and the hostility his name held against certain families, Harry was beginning to think that it would be best if he remained in the non-magical, regular world. Where normal things – good and bad – happened. Where no one was trying to kill him since he was a baby. Where his name wasn't a marketable commodity. Where he could get away and hide and be like everyone else. He didn't have that luxury in the wizard world.

Just as his thoughts turned dark, another wormed its way in; he and Dumbledore did have a shaky truce, and Dumbledore had let it slip that there were two indisposed men who were suppose to be taking care of him: Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. He could ask his friends if they knew who they were, or send them an owl asking for an audience. He truly liked the Woolworth's, but if Harry actually had family...

"Hello, Mr. Potter."

Startled, Harry ripped his headphones off and turned in surprise; Nicolas Flamel was leaning casually against the large tree trunk Harry and his friends usually sat under.

"Professor!" Harry grasped at his chest. "Please don't scare me like that again, sir – else I might think that you're in league with Voldemort, trying to kill me."

Flamel laughed heartily, and moved toward Harry, joining him by the pond's shore.

"My apologies, Mr. Potter," the older man smiled. "May I join you?"

"Sure."

The two were silent for some time, taking in the scene before them, watching the leaves from the giant oak tree fall silently onto the water.

"What were you thinking about?" asked Flamel suddenly. "You seemed so far away – I would have thought that you'd hear me walk up, especially with the leaves under my feet."

"I was thinking about Headmaster Dumbledore," admitted Harry. "I'm very curious about the prophecy he spoke about, but when I looked in the library I only found a few books on Occlumency and they seemed far out of my reading level."

Flamel nodded. "Occlumency is nearly a lost art. It's the ability to shield your mind from outside attackers – Legilimens."

"It sounds similar to meditation," commented Harry slowly, mulling that sentence over. "And Legilimens – that must be another branch of Occlumency?"

Flamel nodded. "Yes. Legilimency is the art of reading others' thoughts – similar to the Muggle idea of mind-reading."

Harry nodded back, indicating he was following along. "Where would I learn such an art? Surely from a Master Occlumens or Legilimens to learn to adequately protect myself."

"Yes. Albus is gifted in that area... but so is the Dark Lord," sighed Flamel. He looked down at the twelve-year-old, seeing someone who was much older than that in mentality. He hesitantly continued. "If you think you can handle a heavier workload, come and see me Tuesday afternoon, after your classes. We'll try the basic skills of Occlumency and when we're done two hours worth, you can let me know if you wish to continue."

Harry smiled at the opportunity: training in Occlumency under a great historic figure like Nicolas Flamel! He'd have to be insane to say 'no'.

"I'll be there," promised the boy.

Flamel nodded and walked away, leaving Harry alone again.

Tuesday afternoon came far too quickly, and Harry soon found himself begging time away from his friends, who were beginning to protest that Harry was neglecting them.

Laughingly, Harry dismissed their concerns and promised to be at the Commons that evening for a study session with his friends.

It barely took Harry five minutes to make his way from the Transfiguration classroom to Nicolas Flamel's office on the second floor, West Wing. A bit apprehensive, as the only professor's office he'd seen was Anita Hartz – and he had been reprimanded at that time – stood out vibrantly for him. He was sure, however, that Flamel's office would look differently.

Harry was right; Flamel's office wasn't like Anita's: filled with antiques and warm colours and inviting furniture in case a student needed to talk. No, Flamel's office was masculine and in-your-face.

The view was the same as Anita's, looking over the back of the school, but considering his office was across from hers, Flamel's also looked over the garage.

Decorating the wall were metal shields, elaborate broadswords and a collection of rapiers stood in a tall vase-like cylinder near the door. Fencing masks and throwing knives and ceremonial daggers were displayed proudly behind a glass cabinet. A dueling circle was on the far left of the room, near the shields, broadswords and two impressively dangerous looking medieval lances.

Flamel's desk was pushed into a corner between the garage-view window and the back of the school window, with a tall wingback chair for the professor. Two similar, elaborate wooden chairs faced the front of the desk, for students.

A large fireplace was situated between the two large windows facing the back of the school, near the door but far enough away so that no one was hurt when entering the room. The walls were pale beige, with high ceilings and crown moldings and recess lighting.

Flamel was standing with his back to Harry, looking out the window.

Harry decided to walk in and whistled in appreciation of the weapons. Flamel turned at the sound and flashed a grin at Harry.

"Impressive, aren't they?" he winked, waving Harry to one of the desk's chairs. When Harry sat, Flamel began. "Occlumency isn't easy. In truth, no one your age should even attempt it due to your emotional instability and mental capacity. Most learn Occlumency when they are adults, being able to handle the strain of seeing their worst memories, or most painful memories."

"Is that what Occlumency does?" asked Harry in confusion. "Bring up your worst or saddest memories?"

Flamel shook his head. "No – but that is what a Legilimens would look for first to weaken you. If you cannot accept the things in your past, Harry, and learn to let them be, you will never master Occlumency."

"But I have to," the boy whispered. "Or else I won't ever know why Voldemort wants me... why my parents died."

Flamel sighed. "That's a very heroic thing to do, Harry, but also a very lonely path you'll walk. If you make it your duty to rid the world of Voldemort, you won't stop until he's dead... even if he kills your friends off one by one. Even if the person you love dies in your arms. You will never be able to stop and rest, to relax, to take a break from fighting."

Harry looked down at his hands. "I know," he finally said, in a soft voice. "I know what I'd be condemning myself to. But... but I think that's how it is supposed to be anyway. Why else would he have tried to kill to me as a baby? He wouldn't have done it unless he considered me a threat, even back then. What would I be like with proper training in a year? In five years? In ten years? I could be his best friend or his worst enemy."

Flamel looked steadily at Harry, and find himself wondering if he was truly twelve-years-old. He acted far more mature and accepting of his destiny than grown soldiers under Flamel's old command had. Finally, Flamel smiled slightly and said, "I think you're ready for your Occlumency lessons."

"Haha, little baby Potter has no friends! No one likes Potter, he's a loser! All by himself, even his parents didn't want him!"

"You're an orphan. You're nobody, worthless, ungrateful, a nobody that no one wants or needs. You're a waste of air!"

Harry crying alone, underneath the stairs in his primary school, in the stairwell. The sounds of other children playing at recess could be heard through the stone walls.

Dudley pushing Harry in the playground, the other children looking on in anticipation. "Go on, Dudley, kick him where it hurts!"

"Yeah, he's a freak – he won't feel it!"

"He turned the teacher's hair blue! He's freaky! I don't want to be near him!"

Dudley's fist lashing out and catching Harry's chin, another hitting around his eye, another at his temple; Harry seeing stars, his vision fading out.

“POTTER! Causing trouble again, are we? I’ll have to inform your guardians about this, boy.”

Harry in his cupboard, wondering why no one wanted him, even his mummy and daddy who left him with the horrible Dursleys.

Harry receiving his mathss test, with a large red A on it and the teacher’s script reading “Great job, Harry! Keep up the excellent work!”

Showing Aunt Petunia the grade; “You freak! Getting better marks than poor Dudliums’ own F! You must have bewitched the teacher! You dangerous, freak! Get out of my sight! Go!”

Harry in his Aunt’s living room, holding the Wyckham Academy pamphlet and the Hogwarts letter. Wondering if it was all a joke, as Anita looked at him anxiously. His Aunt’s accusing stare directed at him.

What if I’m not really a wizard and then send me home after I fail to do anything? The thought was projected loudly. Knowing which school he wanted to go to and wondering if his Aunt would forbid him in sheer pleasure.

Horror. Pain. Fear. Worry.

Seeing Voldemort for the first time since he could remember; hearing the hissing voice address him.

“Your father had the courage to stand and face me before he died... as did your mother. She begged me to take her, kill her instead... save you.”

Anger, sadness, pain.

Painpainpainpainpain –

And then it was over.

When Harry opened his eyes, he found himself staring at a molded ceiling and a pair of bright blue eyes.

“All right there, lad?” asked Nicolas. “You hit your head on the edge of the desk when you went down.”

“W-what?” muttered Harry, raising a hand to his throbbing forehead. As he pulled his fingers back, they were sticky with blood.

“I’ve sealed the cut, so there won’t be scarring,” continued Flamel. “You were completely overloaded with the memories, Harry. You’re not yet ready for attacks on your mind.”

Ashamed, Harry’s ear tips and neck turned red, but the boy resolutely kept silent. He had to master Occlumency.

“I’ll give you some books on meditation. When you think you’ve got that down – and can relax and have no thoughts in your mind – you can come back to me. Not before then, though,” Flamel added sternly. Harry’s head fell, his chin nearly touching his chest.

A heavy hand fell on Harry’s shoulder, making the boy look up. “Don’t give up, lad.” Flamel smiled down on Harry. “Most adults can’t even learn Occlumency. I’ll make sure you damn well do, I swear it.”

Harry smiled slowly, nodded, and stood. Flamel’s hand slipped from his shoulder and Harry opened the office door.

“I –” Harry stopped, pausing, his mouth opening and closing. Finally, he stiffened and continued, “Thank you.”

Flamel raised a hand and the door shut behind Harry.

The halls were dark and silent; the majority of students were already in their rooms or at the Commons or library, studying. Flamel had sent the promised books on meditation to Harry by Thursday evening, allowing Harry to study them as soon as he received the texts.

By now, it was mid-October and Wood was pushing the Quidditch team, the Pirates, hard and the soccer team even harder. Games were moved indoors as the weather cooled and frost began to appear on the ground, causing a near record in injuries on the field.

Harry walked slowly down the hallway, his hands deep in his trouser pockets and his head down. He stared at his shoes as his feet mechanically headed toward his bedroom. As he turned a corner, he paused.

His head turned, holding his breath.

There.

Shuffling slowly to a dark crevice underneath the school's large dual staircase, Harry listened and placed the sound he heard; it was that of someone crying.

They had hidden themselves well, crouched into a ball deep in the far corner of the stairwell's shadows.

"Hello?" asked Harry, somewhat foolishly. If the person wanted to be alone, he'd leave them be. But he did want to make sure they weren't bleeding all over the place or dying. Harry knelt down and reached a hand forward, but not far enough to scare the person hiding.

The sniffles and muffled sobs stopped.

"Come on out," continued Harry. "I'm not going to hurt you."

A few agonizingly long seconds passed before the shadow moved and headed to Harry. The shadow paused, but then shuffled forward into the light.

It was Luna Lovegood.

Harry's breath hitched as he took in her red-rimmed eyes and pale, drawn face. Her Coke-cape necklace was missing and there was a bright red line around her neck. Her hair was messy and her uniform had wrinkles.

Harry took it all in with a glance, and felt his lips thin into a firm, straight line.

"Do you want to walk with me, Luna?" he offered, waiting for the girl to take his outstretched hand. His other fished in his trouser pocket for a handkerchief.

Luna bit her lip and nodded, her shaking hand lying on top of his. Harry firmly wrapped his fingers around her hand and helped her up, watching silently as she straightened her uniform and brushed imaginary lint of her skirt.

She looked rather adorable, Harry concluded, with a slight smile, his gaze lingering on her rainbow-coloured knee sock. One was still around her knee, but the other was crunched down and her ankle peeked out from its elastic band.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Harry finally asked, handing Luna his kerchief.

Luna took it and dabbed her eyes daintily. She said nothing, so Harry shrugged and together they started up the stairs to the West Wing.

Finally, Luna said softly, "My roommate hates me."

Harry started. "Pardon?"

Luna sighed and repeated herself. "My roommate hates me; my class thinks I'm loony."

“No, they don’t,” argued back Harry. “You’re most certainly not loony.”

“Yes, I am,” she said sadly, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Her radish earring caught the reflected light from a ceiling light. “They call me ‘Loony Luna’ and make fun of my earrings and my necklace.” She fingered her throat and swallowed.

“They ripped it off of my neck.”

“Who is they?” asked Harry, bluntly and with an angry tone. Luna glanced up at him, and saw that Harry wasn’t even looking at her; he was looking straight ahead, staring down the empty wing corridor with clenched fists.

“Sarah Fawcett and Abigail Hamilton.” Luna glanced away from the Boy-Who-Lived. “And my roommate, Meredith Rowantree.”

“Are they just calling you names and vandalizing your private property?” asked Harry, starting to walk again. Luna hastened her steps to keep up.

“Well, I’m missing my English texts but I don’t know if they took them,” she confessed.

Harry’s frown deepened.

“I don’t think they mean it or anything, Harry,” continued Luna, sensing that perhaps she had let something slip. “They just like doing it. I don’t mind, not really. As long as they’re not hurting me”—

“But aren’t they?” exploded Harry in a harsh whisper, grabbing Luna’s arm and twisting her around with a yank to face him. “They ripped your necklace off – there’s a red line around your neck. They’re stealing your personal property. You don’t think that’s hurting you? You don’t think that they’re bullies and they’ll continue to do this because they think you’ll roll over like a dead puppy and take it?”

Luna blinked, her heart aching over Harry's truthful and vicious words. They stung; stung so hard Luna couldn't breathe for a second, and fought to catch her breath. She knew Harry was right, but at the same time, she didn't want to cause confrontation.

She moved away from Harry slowly, letting his hand fall from her arm.

"When mummy died... I started to see... see things," she paused, glancing at Harry from under her pale, barely-there eyelashes, before looking down again. "It's why people think I'm weird."

"Pardon?" asked Harry, breathing deeply. He was doing his best to control his anger.

"I see things, Harry!" Luna said again. "I see... things no one else sees. Crumple-Horned Snorkracks, creatures that have been extinct for thousands of years, sometimes... people."

"What, like a Seer?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I don't know," admitted the eleven-year-old, shuddering. "But it scares me. But I can't cause them to stop. I see them everywhere, even here."

"Anything here right now?" Harry wouldn't admit it to Luna, not when she was so close to bursting into tears again, but he was insatiably curious (even though he knew it was wrong to be curious about the girls' abilities, they were just really, really, cool).

Luna nodded.

"Where?"

She didn't say.

Harry sighed, ran a hand through his hair and waited. Luna began speaking again. "When my mummy died, I saw..."

"You saw what, Luna? I won't tell anyone," he promised. "Swear on my magic." He lit up briefly as his magic flared and recognized his vow.

Luna looked at the floor. "I saw my mum."

Harry paled. "After...?"

"I was there when the explosion happened." Luna began to wring her fingers together. Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulders and brought her close to him. They walked slowly down the hallway. "She died instantly, but... I still remember the smell – like sulfur or something like rotting eggs and I remember the heat wave that came from the cauldron. I remember being knocked out and when I woke up, she was standing in front of me.

"'It'll be okay,' she said to me. 'Take care of daddy for me; you're all he has left. Mummy loves you.' And then she was gone."

"You can see the dead?" asked Harry slowly.

"I suppose. But I see other things," she continued. "That's why I'm Loony Luna Lovegood. I see things no one else sees – did you know you have this presence around you? You've had it since the first day we met, and probably before then. It's similar to you, but different..."

"Dumbledore said my mother died protecting me," replied Harry with a tug on his heart.

Luna nodded. "Then some of her is still with you. She won't ever leave you, not truly."

"And you can see that? You're not just pulling my leg to make me feel better?"

Luna smiled. "I'm telling the truth."

Harry smiled back and stopped in front of Luna's door. "Look, I know that it's hard telling these bullies off, but you can't let them hurt you."

She looked down.

"You being happy means something to me, and if this continues to be a problem, promise me you'll go to any of the professors or Hartz," Harry demanded. "Especially if you want to handle this on your own terms... but if I find you crying in the hall again, I'll deal with the problem my way."

Luna nodded, solemnly. "Goodnight."

Harry stepped back. "Night, Luna. Take care, okay?"

He began walking back to his room. Luna, however, paused and called out softly, "Hey, Duke?"

Harry turned.

"Thanks." Luna blushed lightly, and then ducked her head. "No one else has ever stood up for me."

Harry smiled. "There will always be someone for you, from now on. I promise."

Luna opened her bedroom door and shut it quietly. Harry stood in his spot for a few more seconds before turning; he should have been in bed long ago.

Harry spent the remainder of October studying and reading the meditation books Flamel lent him. He found that he didn't have too much time with his friends – which was unfortunate – but not fatal; all his friends were in similar positions. Wood had even cut down on practice time for Quidditch and soccer... something unheard of in all of his six years at Wyckham.

Halloween soon approached and mid-semester test dates handed out. Harry, never once regretting his choice of Wyckham over Hogwarts did have one or two black thoughts against his professors when it came to laying on the amount of schoolwork, but he also understood the eventual outcome the majority of his studies would bring to him.

On October 31st, the students enjoyed a wide variety of non-magical and magical treats alongside a ghost-and-goblin themed buffet. Candy apples, licorice wands, toffee and cotton candy were in abundance, as well as slices of pumpkin pie, spiced pumpkin cider, various meats and vegetables, and a few imported fruits.

Students were also given the option to dress up, with a contest of 'best costume' at the end of the evening. For those from more traditional wizarding families, the students participated in Samhain. Those students (and some Muggleborn and halfbloods who didn't know of the traditions) spent their evening after dinner lighting a large bonfire in a pre-selected spot on the school grounds.

Professors and students alike celebrated the end of summer and the transition into the autumn and winter solemnly, partaking then after in passing around an enchanted mug of butterbeer for the students under seventeen to share and a mug of firewhiskey for the older students.

The Charms professor did some fancy spell work and taught the elder students how to 'eat fire' and create spit-flames, while the younger students chased enchanted butterflies and the history professor began an impromptu lesson on the history of Samhain.

Aaron Einser and Felix Gunn won the costume contest, looking eerily like two soldiers coming back from WWI and the dead with an interesting mix of Muggle cosmetics and charms applied to their person.

Sated and tired, the students went to bed satisfied and talking about the costumes they saw.

The next morning, a few of the students with older siblings at Hogwarts were treated to the most unusual and extraordinary news:

The Chamber of Secrets has been Opened: Enemies of the Heir, beware.

Harry sighed. And just when he thought things would die down and people would leave him alone, something strange had to happen at Hogwarts.

He so did not have a good feeling about this.

Harry was right; there was nothing good to be felt. The next day, on November 2nd, Albus Dumbledore arrived at Wyckham wishing to speak to Harry, requesting Hartz's office to speak to the twelve-year-old. The Headmistress allowed it, only if she could sit in.

Dumbledore acquiesced, striding toward Harry with his hand outstretched.

"Harry—"

Harry interrupted the Headmaster, bluntly, standing next to his chair. "If you're here to ask me to go to Hogwarts, you're bloody crazy." He paused. "Sir."

Dumbledore opened his mouth, then closed it. "I was actually going to ask how you were, but we can skip that part, if you would like." He sat down heavily.

Harry blushed. "My apologies," he muttered.

Dumbledore smiled benignly, and conjured a tea set and poured three cups. Harry and Hartz took their delicate china offered.

"What do you know about the Chamber of Secrets?" asked Dumbledore.

"Nothing," replied the preteen. "Am I suppose to?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Only if you were incredibly interested in history – and particularly Hogwartian history."

Hogwartian, thought Harry humourlessly. How so... Dumbledorian.

"Then I'm afraid I've never heard about it. Obviously you have; why don't you enlighten Headmistress Hartz and I about this Chamber of Secrets?"

Dumbledore sighed, his eyes growing troubled. "Fifty years ago, the Chamber was first opened. We never knew who the heir was, although I had my suspicions. During that time, Hogwarts was threatened to close, and the culprit had to be found. The danger increased to a point where a girl was murdered.

"Our head boy of the time, Tom Riddle, confronted Rubeus Hagrid – the groundskeeper – and had him expelled for housing and taking care of the creature that lived in the Chamber... supposedly."

Harry scoffed. "I highly doubt that was the correct monster."

"It wasn't," agreed Dumbledore, sadly. "Hagrid was expelled and I pulled some strings to keep him at Hogwarts, apprenticing to the groundskeeper of the time. Tom Riddle won a special services award to the school and nothing more happened."

"Until now," inserted Hartz quietly. Dumbledore nodded in her direction.

"So why are you here telling us this?" she continued.

Dumbledore placed his teacup down and looked at Hartz evenly, over his half-crescent spectacles. "Should the heir to the Chamber continue, the attack will elevate from being against the caretaker's pet cat to students, again. Should that happen, I think you ought to be prepared to take in students until Hogwarts is deemed safe by the Board of Governors."

Hartz nodded slowly. "I appreciate the warning. But why the history lesson?"

She watched Dumbledore's eyes flick to Harry quickly. She understood.

"A means of precaution; what if the creature can travel outside of Hogwarts?" continued Dumbledore.

"We're very safe," Hartz said dryly. "Harry, I think you have homework to do, don't you?"

Harry nodded, stood and said a mumbled goodbye to Dumbledore and closed the office door behind him. He did not move, however, and pressed his ear to the door.

"You're here and you told Harry the history of the Chamber because you want him to fight for you again," he heard Hartz accuse.

Dumbledore remained silent.

"He's twelve-years-old, Albus! He's a child and ought to be treated as one. He nearly died last year during the incident with a fake Philosopher's Stone and now you want him to defeat an unknown creature that killed a girl? Please. Do your own dirty work."

"He's the Boy-Who-Lived; he has a responsibility to the people of England."

"No, he doesn't. He was one year old when he received that title, and certainly didn't ask for it. He's not even equipped to hold a water gun! He wouldn't know how to defeat a monster if it came up and gave him written instructions. And he shouldn't have to. You have a highly talented and brilliant team of professors at your school – you can handle a secret chamber."

"He will one day have to fight Voldemort, and we both know that he is still out there, biding his time."

"If you're insinuating that Voldemort will come to Wyckham to kill Harry while he's sleeping, it won't happen. You don't know what

wards or other means of protection this school has... and considering all the problems at Hogwarts, I don't think you should be criticizing Wyckham at all."

"What will happen when Voldemort makes his move and Harry isn't prepared to fight him?"

"Harry will be ready – when that time comes. I'm not going to rush him into it by placing him in dangerous, life-threatening situations! I'm his Headmistress and as such, while he is in school and on school property his welfare is my primary concern – like it would be for any student. Don't you dare say that by not sending him to fight a venomous, dangerous, man-eating creature that I'm limiting his ability to stay alive later. I'd rather he be alive right now!"

"And what will you train him to do? Recite poetry and bore Voldemort to death? Oh, yes:

'Tyger Tyger, burning bright,

In the forests of the night;

What immortal hand or eye,

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?'

"Why, that would just bore Voldemort to death."

"Sarcasm doesn't become you Dumbledore."

"What else should I do? I watched that boys' parents lead themselves to their death, just like I have watched others I cared about die. Some weren't even found. I want what is best for him, and that means preparing him for his future."

There was silence, and then: "And just what is his future, Dumbledore? What have you kept hidden?"

"Nothing, my dear."

“You’re hedging. And lying. What is it?”

Harry held his breath.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you, you’re not an Occlumens.”

Harry could just hear Hartz rolling her eyes. “A prophecy. You heard a bloody prophecy and believe that Harry is the one in it. Obviously, it has to do with Voldemort. Let’s simplify it some more: Harry kills Voldemort or Voldemort kills Harry. Why else would you want to send him to his death? To see if your prophecy is wrong, or as practice? Wonderful.”

Harry’s heart was thundering loudly in his chest. Was that it? Was that all that the prophecy said?

Dumbledore sighed and Harry heard a chair scrap against the floor. “I take my leave from your school, Madame; should the situation worsen, you will hear from me... and when the time comes, don’t stop Harry from doing his destiny.”

“Don’t force him, either, Dumbledore,” came the parting reply.

By that time, Harry was long gone from the door. He had heard enough.

AN: Oct.6.06 – Don’t expect another update for some time; I have three essays and one research assignment to complete, with a few more tests peppering the upcoming weeks. Hopefully I’ll be able to write a few more chapters in the meantime to diddle with, as my parents are leaving for Mexico at 3am (and I’ve decided to stay up and say goodbye).

Of course, I’m also horribly sick and missed two days of university – any uni student will tell you and missing two classes can cause you to finish your year with a lower grade, so let’s all hope for the best and hope my flu bug disappears soon.

Now, I'm off to watch my latest obsession: House, md.; I've even fiddled with a Harry-like-House story. Unfortunately, that will not bear fruit until Wyckham and BSI is complete ... and speaking of BSI, readers of that should take note that the chapters have been edited and new content added to add some spice to the storyline. Hopefully an update will soon follow.

Cheers, Kneazle (who can't even type her own name, so please, excuse and point out any obvious typing/spelling errors; I'm sick, drugg'd up on Ibuprofen and Dimetapp.)

Chapter Twelve

Harry was unusually silent following Dumbledore's visit. Blaise and Hermione were especially worried about him; more so Blaise, as their blood ritual enabled him to understand his best friends' fears and worries more than Hermione could.

Finally, after football practice almost a week later, Blaise tugged on the back of Harry's jersey and spoke softly and tersely, "We need to talk."

Harry nodded wearily. He knew what it would be about.

The two walked over to the pond, kicking dead leaves away and shivering in the cool weather. Wood had wanted them to practice outside for a change, because it was sunny, but unfortunately, it was also very cool. All team members were wearing sweaters and grumbling about Wood and his obsessions.

When they reached the pond, Blaise stopped and faced Harry. Harry cringed a bit and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"What's going on?" Blaise finally asked.

Harry breathed in deeply, trying to figure out how to tell your best friend that you have to kill an evil Dark Lord before he kills you. Harry decided to try for tact.

"Remember how I had to see Dumbledore last year, after the Stone incident?"

"Yeah..."

"I asked him why Voldemort wanted to kill me so badly." Harry paused.

Blaise frowned. "What did he say?"

"That there was a prophecy about me – or Neville, but it ended up being me – and Voldemort."

Blaise's knees gave out and he sat heavily in a pile of leaves. He was staring at Harry in shock, fear and a little awe. "Harry... do you understand how prophecies are taken in the wizard world?"

Harry shot his friend a disgruntled look. "Obviously not."

Blaise ran a hand through his curly hair and shut his eyes, in pain. "When a prophecy is made, wizards consider it to be the utmost honour. To be destined to do something – someone so small in the grand scheme of the world! Once the prophecy is heard, there is no way to get out of it. It becomes self-prophesizing."

"Well, I haven't heard it all. Dumbledore said he wouldn't tell me what it was until I learned to Occlude my mind."

Blaise snorted. "Occlumency. Most adults can't even do it – and he expects you to do so at twelve? He's insane."

"Obsessively protective of things that aren't his," corrected Harry gently. "I've started lessons with Flamel."

"What?!"

Blaise surged to his feet; leaves stuck to his clothing scattered everywhere. His eyes were wide and his hair a mess; Blaise, Harry noted, looked scared for the first time Harry had known him. Even after the Stone, Blaise had an aura of calm, collected sensibility. It was only afterward when he lost his composure.

"I needed to know it, Blaise," continued Harry, as though his friend hadn't spoken. "So when Dumbledore came by, he spoke a little about what was happening at Hogwarts. Apparently, the caretaker's cat has been petrified."

"Petrified?" Blaise's frown went deeper. "Hermione might know what that is an effect of."

Harry nodded absently, and then continued. "I left the room but... eavesdropped. I heard some things I probably shouldn't have."

“You heard the prophecy.”

Blaise’s frown melted away. In his eyes, understanding appeared, alongside worry and sympathy. Harry did not mistake his friends’ emotions for pity.

“And...?”

“Either I kill Voldemort... or he kills me. Whichever of us happens to get to the other first.”

Blaise fell into the pile of leaves again.

Harry walked away, his hands shoved in his pockets and his shoulders hunched over.

Harry didn’t show up for dinner, or for Flamel’s Occlumency lessons. Harry didn’t show up for the group’s study session in the Commons later on, either. At eleven that evening, Blaise finally gave up and began looking for his best friend.

Blaise found Harry in the weight room, hitting the punching bag over and over, sweat glistening against his skin. Sgt. Donahue stood silently a few feet away, his arms crossed and a dark expression on his face.

Blaise frowned, noticing the circles under Harry’s eyes and his slightly shaking form. Once Harry stopped for a breather, Blaise spoke up.

“You need to stop; you need to eat something, Harry.”

Startled, Harry turned around. “Blaise. Hi.”

He then shucked the padded gloves off and nodded at Donahue, who pointed at the dumbbells. Harry did a few arm and hand exercises, and then sat on a bench provided. He began with 10 pounds, doing curls.

“Harry,” Blaise tried again, moving forward slowly, sending a glance at Donahue and wondering why he wasn’t stopping the twelve-year-old.

“What is it, Blaise?” asked the weary boy. “You know what I need to do, so why are you here?”

Blaise ran a hand through his black, wavy hair and then closed his eyes, swallowing hard. “You need to eat. You need to sleep, Harry.”

“I can live without those things, I need to get stronger,” countered Harry sharply, but his eyes never rose from his arm and he never paused in his curls.

Blaise almost wanted to stamp his foot. “You can’t save the world if you’re skin and bones or too tired to cast a spell! It’s give-and-take, not just more than the other, Harry!”

Harry paused this time; he looked up at his best friend, and asked, very quietly, “Do you know what it feels like, to have the entire weight of the world on your shoulders? To know that you have to kill the vilest wizard the wizard world has seen in nearly five hundred years? To know that sooner or later, you’ll be going to war and that you’ll most likely see your friends die in front of you?”

“No,” answered Blaise quietly, “I can’t imagine what that would be like.”

“Then you can’t come here and tell me what to do. I need to prepare, I need to protect my friends and family!”

Sgt. Donahue, having heard enough, stepped forward and pulled the dumbbell from Harry’s hands, ignoring the boy’s protest.

“That’s enough, Potter,” the man snapped, causing the preteen to flush angrily, his mouth opening for a retort. “You’re tired, and you’re hungry. You don’t talk back to your professors, Potter, and you’re ready to do so. Listen to Zabini and eat something and get something from your Healer to sleep.”

“I can’t!”

The words burst out before Harry could stop them. Blaise looked at his friend with sympathy, watching as the prophecy’s weight turned Harry into someone unknown and ruined his life.

“Why not?” Sgt. Donahue finally asked, his voice rumbling darkly.

“Because,” began Harry, looking down and blinking rapidly, “Because if I stop, I might not want to start again. I might just want to forget, to hide and to run.”

“Harry!” half-laughed, half-sobbed Blaise, placing an arm around his friends’ shoulders, “In case you haven’t noticed, you never run, you never hide or just give up. It’s just not in Harry Potter’s nature to do so. In fact, I would even go as far as saying that you have a hero complex.”

“Hero complex?” repeated a confused Harry, his emotions draining from him quickly.

Sgt. Donahue smirked. “Hero complex, Potter, is exactly what it sounds like. You play the hero and save people, no matter what – whether you know them or don’t, whether they hate you or love you. You just can’t help it. You have to save the world.”

Harry let out a bitter laugh and nodded in agreement. “I guess so,” he finally admitted, swaying slightly.

Blaise tightened his grip on his friend and said quietly, “Let’s get you to the room. I’ll have Floppy bring up a dinner for you, okay?”

Together, the two moved slowly through the hallways without encountering anyone. Once at their bedroom, Blaise unlocked their door with alohomora, and shuffled Harry in.

The Boy-Who-Lived fell onto his bed, rolling on his side and pulled his covers over him, fully dressed. Hedwig, resting in her cage on the

perch, cooed softly to Harry, soaring toward him and settling on his headboard.

Blaise sighed silently and watched his friend. If Dumbledore was right, and there was a prophecy about Harry, he'd need all the help he could get, and Blaise swore to be there.

On Monday morning, just as Harry sat in his seat next to Blaise and Neville in the Café, the owl mail swooped in through small, ventilation windows near the ceiling. As the students read their mail or read the morning's Daily Prophet, the noise of the room grew louder, and louder until Harry could no longer think.

Glancing at the table that sat the Professors, he saw that they were all in deep discussion, pale and making harsh and fast gestures at the letters they received. Hartz and Flamel's were written on purple parchment, clearly belonging to Dumbledore. Hartz's face was drawn, and Harry suddenly had a horrible feeling that he knew what happened.

Hartz stood, and almost immediately the Café quieted; a student jumped up from their seat and Harry realized it was George Weasley, sitting with the Pirates Quidditch team.

"Is it true?" he asked loudly.

Hartz gave him a nod. "Yes." She began shortly, closing her eyes briefly before opening them. They moved to Harry, and then away. "From what I understand in Dumbledore's own letter, is that there was another attack at Hogwarts. A Ravenclaw was petrified yesterday morning. At this time, there is no new information on what is attacking the students at Hogwarts."

She sat back down, resting her head in her hands, and speaking quickly to the other professors. Blake and Flamel immediately rose and left the Café – and Harry was sure of this – to Floo Hogwarts and ask if the school needed help.

Despite hearing Hartz and Dumbledore speak about him and the prophecy, Harry knew what he had to do. He appreciated Hartz's firm stand of "I've got your back" and a part of him really, really, wished that he could be a normal young wizard, but Dumbledore had changed that.

A prophecy, saying he either has to kill Voldemort or die trying. Harry didn't want a prophecy to rule his life, but it was obvious he might not have a choice in that matter. Trouble had a way of finding him and, incidentally, so did Voldemort. Or was it the other way around? Harry wasn't too sure anymore. His name was practically synonymous with 'trouble' and 'Voldemort.'

"Harry?" asked Blaise lowly, trying to catch his friends' eyes. Harry's head lowered and he glanced at Blaise as well.

"Mmm?"

"Don't do anything stupid."

"Pardon?"

"You're not ready yet. Don't do anything stupid."

Harry paused, and Blaise tensed.

"I'll try not to."

Blaise was temporarily satisfied.

Harry continued to push himself with his schoolwork, Occlumency and meditation, Quidditch and football practice, finding time for his Yearlings and working with Sgt. Donahue.

He knew that he barely saw his friends except for some meals and classes, and that Blaise was doing his best to dissuade Hermione especially from asking some sticky questions.

Harry wasn't ready to tell his friends what he knew of the prophecy. He didn't feel it was absolutely necessary to their friendship to know, and that if they did end up knowing, they would be targets.

Instead, Harry distanced himself from them – not forever, he assured himself repeatedly – for the time being until he had a grasp on what he needed to do and what he could do and what he could not. He was sure that next year, when he was finished with his Yearlings and they would have their own to look after, he could spend more time with his friends.

It was on one of those busy nights that Harry was in the gym's weight room with Donahue that Hermione finally got upset with Harry missing their study groups.

"Where is he?" she complained, throwing her quill down and glancing up at the library doors again, as they opened and a student who wasn't Harry walked in.

Blaise rubbed his temples and continued with his work. Hermione had been asking that question for the past three hours, complaining on end that Harry was not there.

I honestly don't see what the problem is, he thought sourly, Harry is managing to receive top grades in his classes, finishes his readings and essays and yet Hermione is pissed 'coz he's not here showing that he's human and needs to study, too.

Dean and Neville rolled their eyes, editing the other's essays, while Susan ignored Hermione; she was reading Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew – they had to finish reading it by the first of December, as on the fifth they were off to London to see a stage production of it.

"I don't understand, he gets perfect grades and yet I never see him studying!" Hermione continued on, annoyed and pink-cheeked. "How is that possible?"

"Lay off, Hermione," coaxed Neville gently. "It's just grades."

"Just grades? Just grades? Neville, those grades are our futures!"

“Maybe not in the first couple of years, Hermione, think about it; those will likely count at our O.W.L.’s or later, not now.” Dean put Neville’s essay down and reached for his sketch book.

Hermione continued to fume, but fell silent.

She, unfortunately, only lasted another fifteen minutes before she slammed her book cover shut and hissed, “I’m going to find him and give him my mind!”

Blaise’s head shot up in alarm. “Don’t!”

“And why not?” the incensed Hermione questioned, her hands on her hips. When Blaise failed to respond fast enough, she nodded and bent at the waist to retrieve her bag.

“Harry didn’t promise to be here – and... and have you thought that maybe he wants to be alone?” stumbled out Blaise, grasping at an excuse.

“We’re his friends, he doesn’t spend any time with us anymore!” snapped Hermione. She was lucky that there was always a low hum of noise in the library, and that her voice was relatively low when she was angry.

“He has his reasons,” countered Blaise.

“Oh? That he has told you but not us?” mocked Hermione. “How kind of him!”

Blaise was beginning to get angry; he was trying to reason with Hermione but she was too stubborn to see that she didn’t need to know everything about everyone.

“He doesn’t have to tell you if he doesn’t want to, Hermione!” snapped back Blaise. “He is allowed to have his secrets and he can pick and choose who to reveal them to!”

“So, what? He doesn’t consider me important enough as his friend to know?” asked a now hurt, and still very angry, Hermione.

Blaise groaned. “I’m the only one who knows, Hermione! And do I need to remind you of the blood oath that Harry and I share? That makes us practically blood brothers? I cannot tell any of his secrets and he can’t tell any of mine.”

“Then I’ll just have to get it out of him instead!”

“Hermione!” Blaise called, dashing after her and following the bushy-haired girl out of the library, leaving his bag and books behind.

She ignored him and began walking toward their room, but paused on the stairs.

Blaise finally lost his patience. “Granger!” he snarled loudly.

Surprised, Hermione turned.

“Drop it!”

Upset, and more than a little hurt at Blaise’s harsh tone with her, Hermione did not move from her spot.

“Leave Harry alone, Granger,” continued Blaise angrily. “Just because you have to know everything doesn’t mean you have the right to know. By bothering Harry and pestering him about it, you’ll just upset him and lose his friendship. Drop it.”

Hermione blinked, fighting back tears, and nodded her head slowly. She was deeply hurt by Blaise’s tone, and Harry’s avoidance of her, especially. They seemed like such great friends that she was afraid of losing the only friends she ever had. Realizing that pushing Harry for an answer as to why he was ignoring them would just make him clam up, Hermione turned her back to Blaise and walked slowly up the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Blaise asked warily.

Hermione did not turn around to answer him; she just spoke loud enough for him to hear instead: "To my room. I'm sorry. Goodnight, Blaise."

Blaise stood on the staircase for quite some time, until Neville found him, carrying his bag on his other shoulder.

Harry was more than happy to have December fifth to sleep in on; the field trip to London wasn't until 10 a.m., so instead of getting up at eight, he could get up at nine. Surprisingly, both Blaise and Harry slept soundly and deeply with only an extra hour.

The second years wore their standard black pants or skirts, and navy blue Wyckham sweaters with Oxfords underneath. Only the boys had to wear their ties (Susan, Su and Lisa were quite pleased to wear their new, matching navy blue berets at a jaunty angle; Lisa's great-aunt had apparently knitted them for the girls), but they all brought their knapsacks with the play, notebooks, and pens.

After his morning shower and a light breakfast – both he and Blaise snuck into the kitchens and showered Floppy with affection until the house elf was bawling and shoving French toast into their hands – Harry was ready to leave Wyckham and travel to London.

Blaise knew about the Dursleys and their treatment of him, so he was trying to tone down his bragging of what to see and do while they had their afternoon lunch. Instead, he was mentioning places of interest that were nearby.

The bus Hartz had rented for their trip was the same as the Quidditch League one from last year, and the eleven second year students were happily seated.

They arrived in London near twelve, with Hartz, Blake and Kingsley Shacklebolt as their chaperones.

"All right," began Hartz, clapping her hands for attention. "You lot can split up into three groups and head out with one of us for lunch. We'll

meet back here in an hour and then take our seats for the performance. Sounds good?”

The second years nodded; Harry, Blaise, and Hermione moved immediately together and toward Shacklebolt.

Ernie McMillan, Su Li, Lisa Turpin and Steven Cornfoot walked over to their Headmistress, while Wayne Hopkins, Dean, Neville and Susan began talking to Blake.

Almost immediately, the groups left in opposite directions. Blaise and Hermione were doing their hardest to convince Shacklebolt to take them to the most exotic restaurant they could find – Blaise a little more vehemently, due to knowing about Harry’s background – but were failing.

They settled for McDonald’s, which Harry was just as happy to have compared to Indian, Japanese or any other restaurant they could have gone to.

After pestering Shacklebolt for information on their end of term test (without results) the group cleaned up their table and left McDonald’s, heading back to the theatre.

From there, Harry was quite in awe; the second years were led backstage to see the dressing rooms, the lighting and make-up rooms, and even on stage briefly, before being shooed off. The play would begin soon.

Although meant as a present-day play in Shakespeare’s time, the director of their version decided to make *The Taming of the Shrew* a Western comedy, and in Harry’s opinion, did so brilliantly.

The two hours they had in the theatre allowed him to think of nothing else. He was just another boy with his school out on a field trip. As such, Harry allowed himself to be lulled into a dream-like state where he was aware of the lines being said, and what was occurring, but the rest of his consciousness – the prophecy, his need to protect among others – was temporary pushed aside.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed the outing, and spoke loudly and enthusiastically to his friends about particular quotes, scenes, and what he enjoyed best –

“—He was clearly baiting Katherine!”

“Absurd – it was all sexual innuendo.”

“Only you would think so, Blaise.”

“He called her a wasp—”

“And where do wasps have their stinger?”

“Oh, please, I don’t want that mental image!”

“—Brilliant, absolutely brilliant... so witty, so—”

“—Disgusting! We do not need to know that at our age!”

“It was hot. He obviously fancied her from the beginning.”

“He was all about male dominance! Subjugation of women!”

“... It was a play, Hermione.”

“What’s that suppose to mean, Dean!?!”

“—oh, hell. Here we go...”

The argument and banter continued until they arrived back at Wyckham, where the male second years were quite happy to be out of ear range of their viciously smart and opinionated friend, Hermione Granger.

As Blaise and Harry collapsed after a quick sprint to their room, half-laughing and half-panting, Flamel knocked on their door.

“Come in!” stuttered Blaise, who was trying to catch his breath.

Nicolas Flamel did so, with a wry smile on his face. "Would your fit of hysterics have anything to do with the consternated look on Miss Granger's face as I came up the stairs?"

The two boys began laughing harder again, giggling helplessly into their pillows. Flamel watched in amusement for a bit, before clearing his throat. The two, red-faced, gave him their attention as best as possible.

"I'm here to get a list of students who are planning to stay here at Wyckham over the holiday break," he finally said.

Harry frowned. "I thought it wasn't allowed? Last year it wasn't, at the least."

Flamel sighed. "This year is different. With Hogwarts' attacks there is a chance that parents will pull their children out and that more will attend after the break. If that will happen, the parents need a part of the holiday to visit the school and for us to assign a room to their child."

Blaise shrugged. "I'm certain I'll be going home."

"Me too," answered Harry quietly. "I'll be staying with the Woolworth's this Christmas."

"Excellent." The older wizard flicked his wand over his paper and Harry watched in awe as the quill Flamel had charmed wrote Harry and Blaise's name in the "away" column.

"Are you looking forward to spending the holidays with the Woolworths?" asked Blaise curiously.

Harry shrugged. "They threw me a very nice birthday party, so... I suppose it won't be any different except for the fact that it'll be Christmas."

"Have you ever... um," Blaise paused. "Have you ever had a non-magical Christmas?"

Harry shook his head. "The Dursleys never allowed it, of course. I heard everything from my cupboard."

Blaise visibly shuddered, but tried to suppress it for Harry's sake. "Right." The Italian then sent a shrewd look at his friend. "Have you even got Heather and Robert something? Or Sean and Holly? And speaking about gifts, what about Neville, Dean, Susan and Hermione?"

A blush that crawled up Harry's neck to his ears told Blaise what he needed to know. With a long-suffering sigh, he reached into his bedside drawer and pulled out a colourful catalogue. "Well, let's get this over with then."

The final two weeks before the school was let out for Christmas break was tense and heavy with anticipation. Numerous snowball fights occurred on weekends when the pressure of semester-end essays and tests became too much.

Harry found himself almost always dragged out for a game, regardless of where he hid, and secretly admitted that it was good to pretend nothing was wrong. He could tell that Hermione would physically restrain herself from asking any questions (Harry assumed it had something to do with Blaise) but was notably tense and aware of everything Harry did.

Harry continued to work out every evening in the weight room with Sgt. Donahue, and continued on Saturdays his meditation with Flamel. His Occlumency was getting a bit better, but was still difficult.

"Until you come to understand and accept your past, Harry," said Flamel one evening, "We will never be able to move forward."

The older wizard then settled his hand on Harry's shoulder and said, "I think that this is enough for this semester. We will try again once school resumes. Have a good holiday, Harry."

Somehow Harry found enough time to finish his essays and study for his tests, and do surprisingly well considering.

Even news from Hogwarts was slow and mundane, and the school fell into a lull of false pretense. On Friday, December nineteenth, Wyckham learned some more distressful news: Justin Finch-Fletchley and a ghost were petrified.

Hartz and Blake were not at the Professor's table; Harry assumed they were handling the Hogwarts issue and on the Floo with the school, and replying to letters or sending them out to parents about the risk at Hogwarts.

Harry felt his chest begin to ache, and absently wondered if he was getting heartburn. Hermione, on the other hand, across from them at the breakfast table, was looking thoughtful.

"What is it?" asked Neville quietly. "You seem to be thinking of something."

"I've heard the term 'petrified' before in context to something, but I can't exactly remember what," the girl replied.

Dean snickered, "Yeah, that's what happens when your head is too full of everything else. You can't find what you need!"

Susan elbowed him in his side and glared.

Hermione settled for ignoring Dean, and finally stood.

"Where are you off to?" asked Harry, frowning as his ache became more pronounced.

"To the library," came Hermione's slightly surprised look. "Where else would I be?"

Blaise chuckled and Susan piped up she'd join the bushy-haired girl; the two left, joining a growing crowd that began to head for their classes.

“Well,” said Neville finally, “It seems like we’ll be getting new classmates soon.”

While certainly not against sharing Wyckham, Harry knew that Neville’s sentence didn’t make him feel particularly good, either. Harry rubbed at his chest and grabbed his knapsack, rising from the table.

Blaise rose with him, while Neville and Dean gathered their open texts.

“What’s up?” Harry’s best friend asked.

Harry shrugged. “The whole attack thing is fishy, and I don’t like it one bit.”

“Yes, well, you’re here and not at Hogwarts, Harry,” Blaise peered at his friend. “You’re planning something?”

“No,” confirmed Harry. “But I am thinking of planning something.”

Scoffing, Blaise swung his bag up over his shoulder and shook his head. “Your middle name shouldn’t be ‘James.’ It ought to be ‘Trouble.’”

Harry grinned and the two fell into a companionable silence, until Harry spoke up. “I could always have two middle names.”

Blaise groaned.

Once his tests were done, Harry went to see Professor Shacklebolt.

“Can I help you, Harry?” asked the tall, dark-skinned man.

Harry nodded, biting his inside lip, but stepped into the room and approached his professor’s desk confidently.

“I need your help.”

Shacklebolt's eyebrows rose in surprise. The man had not been expecting such a response. He set down his Bic pen, shuffled the papers he was grading aside and clasped his hands together, giving Harry his all.

"What do you need help with?"

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Shacklebolt could see his determination and knew, at that moment, Harry Potter was absolutely serious about what he was going to say next.

"I overheard Dumbledore and Hartz when he was last here," the boy began. "I already knew after last year that Voldemort had a reason to come after me personally, and it was because of a prophecy. I never knew the wording of it, but when Dumbledore was here I learned its general meaning."

Shacklebolt sighed and sat back in his chair, leaning on the back two legs. A prophecy, he mused, so that was why Harry was pushing himself into Ministry standard fourth year material.

Harry continued, "I either kill Voldemort or he kills me."

Kingsley Shacklebolt fell to the floor as his balance lost against gravity.

He surged up, leaving his fallen chair behind him. His eyes were wide and he was clenching the edge of his desk. "You have to kill... Him?"

Harry nodded.

Shacklebolt sighed and turned. He righted his chair and sat in it, thinking hard. "I suppose you want me to help you, learn Auror standard material?" He waved his wand and a chair appeared behind Harry

Harry sighed and sat in the offered chair. “No, not really, but once I get older I would appreciate that kind of help,” the preteen admitted. “What I really want is to learn how to duel.”

“I do offer a dueling course that is a side class of Defense in a students’ sixth year,” mused aloud Shacklebolt. “At this point, Harry, I don’t think that I could really teach you anything. You’re still too young to be let into the dueling class – no doubt about it, the senior students would flatten you in a heartbeat – and to be honest, your reflexes and skill in football and Quidditch are helping you more than you think.”

Harry sighed in disappointment. “I see.”

“Harry.”

The Boy-Who-Lived looked up at the warm tones of his Defense professor, confusion and disappointment on his face.

“Don’t look at this as me turning away. I know that Donahue has you doing extra training in the weight room. My suggestion is that you read as many defense books as you can, and practice the spells. If you wish, I’ll push you harder in class and mark you a bit harder than your peers. I know it’s not fair, but if it’ll help you feel as though you are preparing yourself for an inevitable battle between You-Know-Who and yourself, it’ll help.”

Harry nodded, but was still slightly disappointed. “Thank you, sir.”

Kingsley suddenly smiled. “I’ll tell you what, Harry – how about you find yourself a free day and you come to see me in the evenings. We’ll work on your silent casting. I’m sure no adult will believe you can do it at such a young age! It’ll be a great trump card.”

Harry felt a grin creep onto his face; that was exactly what he was looking for. Thanking his professor, he shook the man’s hand excitedly and left the room in a daze.

However, that daze soon disappeared and a look of determination took it over.

Get ready, Voldemort, thought Harry viciously, because now that I know it's gonna be between me and you... I'm upping the stakes. You won't know what'll hit you!

AN: Yay, new chapter! To those who wish to know, I am no longer sick – unless it is of school. Next update within the same timeframe – we're looking at a month or less. So... without further ado:

((wails pitifully)) what is with this shit?! I had an essay to hand in today, a test Tuesday, and another essay due Wednesday I haven't started! A German test two Mondays from now, and on the week of the 13th, a test on Wednesday, an essay due the Thursday, and the week following that, another essay due, with two tests following that week (now at the 27th of November) on Tuesday and Friday, and on December 4th, my final semester test in German.

SHIT MAN, SHIT. My brain is mush. Again: any obvious spelling or grammar errors, I'll fix when you lovely, lovely, intelligent reviewers point them out.

And now – off to write an essay about Wordsworth and Keats. Wah! I hate poetry, and “Tintern Abbey” and “Fall of Hyperion” even more.

– Kneazle Oct.27.06

Chapter Thirteen

Heather Woolworth took one look at Harry when he opened the front door and was ready to frog march him directly to the dinner table. Harry was certain, should she have done that, he would never have left the table for the duration of the holidays.

Instead, Heather frowned, placed her hands on her hips and pointed at the kitchen table.

Harry understood.

He meekly sat at his place, smiling briefly at Holly's antics (she had grown) and Sean's rather baffled look. Robert and Heather were having a conversation in the hall –one which he could not make out – before silently slipping into the kitchen as well.

Heather began to serve dinner (roast beef, mashed potatoes, side vegetables, freshly baked buns and pudding for desert) and the conversation revolved around Sean's studies at Charterhouse.

Harry listened with half an ear, trying to figure out how he could continue with his regimen at home without any weights.

When he missed a pointed and loaded question from Heather, Harry mentally shook and scolded himself. Pay more attention, Potter!

"I asked, Harry, what you were doing at school. You've grown," Heather commented nonchalantly. Her eyes, however, were beadily watching him like a hawk and its prey.

Harry shrugged. "Worked a lot with the weights in the gym, did my school work, took care of the first years assigned to me, that's about it."

"How are your friends?" continued Heather.

Harry was suspicious. "Fine... thank you for asking."

"And the classes? Everything going all right in them?"

"They're good too." Harry reached for his glass of water and took a sip.

"What about your Occlumency lessons with Professor Flamel?"

Harry spat out his drink.

"What?"

Heather looked smug for a second before continuing. "Professor Flamel called the house last night to tell us that you'd been working yourself up over something. You've taken extra classes on top of your normal ones, Harry, and apparently you've been neglecting your friends."

"I have not," replied Harry tartly, vowing to snub his potions professor when he returned to Wyckham.

Heather raised an eyebrow. Harry stared back at her.

They continued to stare at each other for some time, with Sean and Robert glancing awkwardly at them back and forth; finally, Harry's eyes lowered and Heather's eyes softened.

"Harry, why on earth would you think you needed to become Superman?" she asked quietly.

Harry placed his cutlery on his empty plate and sighed. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"Get hurt? Who would hurt us?" asked a flabbergasted Robert.

Harry looked up. "Voldemort."

"He's dead though, isn't he?" asked Robert, scratching his head and frowning.

"Not dead. Biding his time," corrected Harry quietly.

“And whatever you want to tell us could put us in danger?” Heather confirmed. She sighed, pushed back her chair and stood, reaching for a messy Holly. “Harry, in case you haven’t realized yet – you’re Harry bloody Potter; Voldemort’s wanted you since you were born. Robert and I are already in danger for taking you in but we don’t regret it.”

Harry paled, as though he hadn’t realized that yet, before sending a questioning glance at Heather.

“Harry,” began the woman, “I am honored to know you. Should anything happen, it would be worth having spent the time getting to know a fabulously brilliant and kind-hearted young man. You are worth it.”

Harry ducked his head and blushed.

Robert smiled knowingly at his wife and nodded at Sean, who caught the message.

Groaning, the teen rose from his seat with his dinner plate in hand, “Fine, fine, I can tell when I’m not wanted.”

He smirked at Harry and winked, put his dish in the sink and disappeared from the kitchen.

Heather, who was now gently rocking Holly in her arms, spoke. “I’ll put the Munchkin to bed and then we’ll talk in the den, all right, Harry?”

Harry murmured his agreement and Robert stood slowly, walking with Harry to the den. They were both silent, choosing to sit on the leather sofa, and both equally lost in their own thoughts.

When Heather joined them, she left the lights off and instead moved to the fireplace to start and stoke a fire. In the corner of the den the decorated electric lights on the Christmas tree gave off a soft white, blue, green, yellow and red, and the star on the top flickered on and off periodically.

Once the fire was flickering in the den, Heather sat on a well-worn and loved armchair and tucked her feet under her. "Well, Harry. What caused your change?"

Harry took a deep breath and revealed what he heard between his Headmistress and Albus Dumbledore. Heather and Robert remained silent, nothing in their posture or facial expressions showing animosity or fear. They were blank.

"That does explain some things," murmured Heather slowly, her breathy voice having disappeared under the strain of a serious topic.

Harry wove his fingers together tightly and placed them on his knees, staring at them and hoping the Woolworth's wouldn't think any less of him. "I'll understand if you want me to go."

Robert started. "What? Go? Why would we want you to go, Harry?"

"I'm liable to attract trouble and bring it here. You have Sean and Holly to look after," explained Harry quietly. The on-off flashing of the star on the Christmas tree was lulling him into a sleepy, hypnotic state, but a part of him was eerily aware.

Robert chuckled quietly. "Harry, in case you forgot, you were given a file on us before your guardianship. We were also given one on you. We know what happened in your first year, and to your parents. We knew what we were getting in to."

Harry gawked.

Heather continued, "So, yes, we might be danger of any Death Eaters or Voldemort. But it's worth the risk of having the chance to know such a wonderful boy."

Harry slumped back into the couch, stupefied. They didn't care.

Heather cleared her throat and leaned forward in the armchair. "Now, Harry, there is something we do need to discuss with you."

"Yes?" asked the twelve-year-old, biting his lower lip.

“You’re too skinny, sweetie,” began Heather, her voice rising and turning breathless again. “You haven’t been eating. Now, while I understand that you want to... uh, bulk up, you’re only twelve, sweetie, and you need to eat more to grow. You’ll get those muscles and there’s nothing wrong with doing some stretching exercises outside of your physical education classes... but don’t push it like you have been, okay?”

“Okay,” agreed Harry easily.

“Also, spend more time with your friends,” continued Heather maternally, “They’re very worried about you, you know, and they care for you very much.”

Harry sighed. “I promise, I will.”

Robert nodded, satisfied. Heather beadily eyed him for a bit, as though saying I’m watching you, mister, but she finally eased back in her seat as well and seemed satisfied.

The three relaxed in front of the fire for a bit longer before Harry yawned and stretched, then announced he was going to bed.

Although the two flights of stairs were slightly taxing on his young body, Harry made it to his room in the tower and mumbled a quiet, “night, Hedwig,” before slipping with his clothes on under the covers.

He was asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Over the course of the three weeks that Harry had off, he ate more, exercised less, and spent the majority of his time with Sean and Holly and Hedwig. He wrote to all his friends – Blaise invited him yet again to the Minister’s Ball and to spend New Years’ at Bramasole, which Heather and Robert approved of – and those who received letters near Christmas Eve from Harry sent back his presents via Hedwig.

Harry's first, real Christmas took place with the Woolworths, who felt more like family than the Dursley's ever had. The family gathered early Christmas morning in the kitchen, eating a feast of pancakes, sausages and fruit; they then went to the den and gave gifts out to family members, ooh'ing and ahh'ing over the contents and expressing joy and thanks.

Hedwig was not forgotten, either, in the Christmas presents, as Heather had Francesca Zabini send her some owl treats from Diagon Alley for Harry's favourite bird.

The family spent the rest of the day together, either quietly reading or watching movies on TV, or trying out their new toys and games.

The Minister's Ball had been pushed back from before Christmas – as it had been last year – to before New Years' Eve, as “ringing in 1993” event.

Once again, Harry arrived at Bramasole with a smile on his face and many distinguishable lip marks on his cheeks from Francesca Zabini, and Blaise's numerous aunts and cousins.

Scowling playfully, he and Blaise raced up the stairs and into Harry's room at the Zabini's.

“Been a good Christmas so far, then?” asked Blaise, settling himself on Harry's bed, leaning against the headboard. His eyes watched Harry carefully as his best friend folded and placed his clothing away.

“Yes, Blaise, it's been good,” replied the preteen. “Heather found out what I've been up to at school and I told them.”

Blaise sat up. “You told her the prophecy?”

Harry cocked his head to the side and glanced over his shoulder and his friend, eyes narrowed. “Yesss,” he said, drawing out the s's and sounding slightly hiss-like. Blaise vaguely shivered.

“I hate it when you do that,” he muttered, but then spoke louder: “People are killed over prophecies, Harry. If they know...”

“They know the risks, Blaise.”

“Are you sure?”

“They took me in, and I’m the blood Boy-Who-Lived, what do you think?”

Blaise fell silent and Harry finished his unpacking, a little rougher than he meant to.

Blaise sighed and murmured loud enough for Harry to hear, “I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” muttered Harry back. Now done with his clothes, he leaned against the dresser, his hands splayed wide apart on the top of it. “You know me better than anyone, Blaise.”

“I know,” the Italian responded. “I didn’t mean to make it sound like you didn’t know what you were doing.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied, running a hand through his hair. “I know the risks, they know the risks. I needed to tell someone.”

“I know; Hartz and Shackbolt and Donahue know. They’re all going to help you, Harry, I promised I would,” repeated Blaise strongly.

Harry quirked a smile and Blaise mirrored it; the two were still staring at each other when Paulo entered with Mario behind him.

“Are we interrupting something?” he asked dryly, and the two friends began laughing.

“Come on!” whined Mario, tugging on Blaise’s hand at the bed. “Mama’s downstairs saying she wants to measure you and Harry to make sure you haven’t grown again!”

Blaise rolled his eyes and allowed his brother to tug on his arm; Harry watched with a bit of longing in his eyes, but it was masked with happiness and amusement. Paulo, however, had noticed it.

"It must be a difficult time of year for you, Harry," the Zabini heir commented quietly.

Harry shrugged, following the older man out of the room and down the golden-coloured hall. "I suppose."

"From what I gather, the Dursley's never treated you properly," he continued.

"Yes."

"Did you ever have a nice Christmas while with them?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I was the 'freak'; not good enough for any presents or their time."

Paulo's lips thinned but he removed the dangerous thoughts from his head – for now. "And you don't remember...?"

Harry, again, shook his head. "No. I was only a baby then. I don't remember my parents at all."

Paulo sighed. "I'll see if I can't contact some of your parents' friends from school, Harry. You should have some memories of them. I'm sure if you haven't already, Archibald Wallace would be willing to take you to your family vault. There might be some pictures or items of theirs down there."

Harry hummed. "I hadn't thought of that. Will we be going to Diagon Alley then?"

"I thought we could on the second of January," offered Paulo, as they walked into the kitchen. Harry hadn't even realized they'd walked through the entire manor.

Smiling, Harry thanked Paulo, before being accosted by the house elves, all eager to bring 'Master Harry' to their Mistress for his measurements.

The Ministry Ball looked the same as it did last; there were gold sheets of gauzy fabric strung from one marble column to another, there was a shimmering fountain out on the patio deck, and there was a large buffet table filled with hors d'oeuvres. A stage for an orchestral band was set up and the musicians were already playing soft waltzes and reels.

Harry gave his expensively tailored coat to a house elf at the reception area, thanking it (and causing the elf to squeak in fright and awe), thanking Wallace and the Zabini parents for their exquisite taste in fashion. Harry looked every little bit like the Duke he was suppose to be.

Blaise stood quietly next to him, his eyes sweeping over the crowd on the dance floor and by the table, or milling about in small groups chatting. The lull of voices was easy to fall asleep to.

"Are you three going to disappear again like last year?" asked Francesca, with a perfectly arched eyebrow.

Harry and Blaise immediately flashed her 'who me? I'm innocent' grins while Mario watched the two older children with brotherly affection and amusement.

Paulo laughed and waved them off. Harry and Blaise started toward the same room as last year, the one the children had taken for themselves. Glad to see nothing had changed, they entered.

Neville had already arrived and was chatting politely to Terry Boot and the Patil twins; Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott and Malfoy's bodyguards, Crabbe and Goyle, were seated by the fire.

Harry did not know anyone else in the room, and thought it best to stay silent, especially as Blaise took the lead and waved at Neville, and then went to Draco to say hello.

"Hello Draco, Theo," Blaise said as friendly as he could. Draco looked up and smiled – a true, rare smile.

“Blaise!” he looked past the tall boy. “And your brother and Harry.”

Harry nodded and Mario smiled. “Enjoying yourself?” asked Harry.

Draco shrugged. “Could be better.”

Neville had finished his conversation and was now standing next to Harry. “Hello Malfoy,” he said pleasantly.

Draco hesitated for a brief second, but then politely replied, “Evening Longbottom.”

Nott scowled and Crabbe and Goyle said nothing, but Blaise and Harry took control of the situation and chatted of Quidditch (“congratulations,” commented Draco on Harry’s name being in the Daily Prophet’s Sports section. “That Wronski Feint was brilliant!”) and of their professors. Draco had nothing nice to say about their professor, Gilderoy Lockhart.

“The man is a bloody idiot!” he ranted, twin splotches of red on his pale cheeks, silver eyes narrowed. “He doesn’t know anything! It’s like Dumbledore wants us to fail in our classes!”

“He’s a ponce,” agreed Theo quietly.

Harry’s eyes narrowed, and Neville frowned. “Last year wasn’t any better, I heard.”

“Yeah, it was Quirrell,” agreed Blaise, shifting his eyes to Harry slowly. Harry swallowed and surreptitiously shook his head at Blaise.

“Well, Quirrell died at the end of the year,” snorted Draco, “and the Headmaster told us it was a ‘Dark Arts related complication that affected him over the course of the year!’”

“I’ll bet,” murmured Harry smoothly. Now that the topic was exhausted, Blaise hit Draco lightly and suggested, “Let’s go talk a walk around the ballroom. The rest of the kids took off a while back. We can come back later.”

“Finally,” sighed Mario excitedly. “I’m starving!”

The adults ignored the group of eight children as they laughed and playfully taunted each other, moving from one dark corner to the next.

Draco had suggested playing ‘Aurors and Dark Wizards’, which made Harry fall over from laughing so hard. When Neville, completely flabbergasted, asked Harry what was wrong, Harry replied: “D-Draco, I k-n-k-know you don’t like M-Muh-Muggles, but there’s a g-game that they play c-called ‘Cops and Robbers’!”

Draco flushed in embarrassment, one for coming up with something that Muggles play as well, but also for being laughed at. However, he did realize the joke wasn’t on him, so he took it with Malfoy stride.

In the end, it was decided that Draco, Theo and Crabbe and Goyle would be Aurors and Harry, Blaise, Mario and Neville would be the Dark Wizards. The irony was not lost on anyone present, including young Mario.

Harry and Blaise teamed up, while Neville took Mario under his wing, so to speak, and ushered him into the shadows so well that neither teen could see where they were. Apparently Neville had been holding out on some skills.

Harry and Blaise crept toward the entrance staircase, slinking down behind a few potted plants and waited.

As Crabbe and Goyle lumbered by, they ignored them, and waited for Theo and Draco. Soon, the smarter pair sauntered past, and Harry and Blaise burst from the leaves.

“Guh!” Theo jumped, wide-eyed. Draco’s own eyes were comically wide as the two Dark Wizards surprised him. Any adult who was watching (not that there were any) would’ve seen a very accurate representation of the Auror Force and their skills at catching dark wizards.

Blaise had Draco pinned to the floor with a hand on his chest and Harry had a fistful of Theo's robes.

"Was that the best you've got?" sneered Draco from the floor, trying to not look put out at losing.

Blaise laughed gleefully. "How about we give these bastards another chance, eh, Harry?"

Harry's own eyes were twinkling at the challenge. With his promise to Heather and Robert, he hadn't had much of a chance for exercise and this was getting his blood going.

"Yeah, I think that's fair," the emerald-eyed boy agreed.

Immediately, as though they could speak telepathically to each other, Blaise and Harry stepped back from their prey and spoke, together, "Tag! You're it!"

Draco's jaw dropped and Theo was smoothing his robes out. Narrowing his eyes, Theo boldly stated, "You have until I hit twenty hippogriffs, so I suggest you start moving!"

Blaise and Harry laughed and took off, darting between potted plants, behind heavy velvet curtains and around "oh my!"ing elderly witches who sat on the sidelines with their young charges.

As the two boys turned the corner, Harry suddenly stopped and Blaise smacked into his back.

Rubbing his chest, Blaise whined, "Harry, why'd you stop?" and would've continued had he not looked up.

In front of him, he saw Terry Boot and Zacharias Smith – two well-connected wizards from families of wealth – crowding another boy against the wall. The boy was deathly pale and had wide, black eyes. He was short, shorter than Harry, but clearly older than twelve.

“Found you!” cowed Theo from behind them. When Harry and Blaise didn’t reply, Draco and Theo stepped around them and their eyes narrowed.

Finally, Harry stepped forward. “Boot! Smith!”

The two Ravenclaws turned in surprise at the sharp bark, thinking an adult had caught them; however, when they saw Harry and the other purebloods behind him, they sneered.

“Potter, come to join in on the fun?” asked Smith, brushing his nails against his shimmering robe.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and Blaise glanced worriedly around before stepped up right beside Harry. Draco and Theo recognized the subconscious gesture of power, and copied the movement. Smith and Boot would have to now dart around the semi-circle that had formed around the three boys.

“Leave him alone,” demanded Harry darkly, eyes narrowed. His hands were fisted at his side.

Boot frowned. “Why?” he turned back to the boy. “We just wanted to play with him, didn’t we?”

Draco sneered. “I find it inexcusable that it is two Ravenclaws, known for their intelligence, that have cornered a boy against a wall in a place where any adult could walk by, where anyone could hear you. Especially when they are using Slytherin techniques!”

“Come off it, Malfoy, I’ve seen you do it numerous times to Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs at school.” Boot was now scoffing and crossed his arms.

“Besides,” added Smith, hoping to play up to the pureblood supremacy, “He has vampire blood in him!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “And?” he asked dangerously. He felt, rather than saw, Draco and Theo shift nervously beside him.

“Vampires are not normal, like we are,” continued Smith, eyes dark and hair a mess. “They have different magic, they kill people, and they’re dangerous!”

The teen against the wall had his eyes closed and was breathing deeply. Harry could tell he was frightened (he was often in that position himself when younger and Dudley was chasing after him), but he was also trying to control himself. He didn’t want to hurt them.

“Smith, Boot, I suggest you use those brains you have and leave.” Harry waited, and when they didn’t move, he suddenly hissed, in a low, drawn-out voice and calling up his Parseltongue ability, “I sssuggests you move now. Sssstart moving.”

Both boys jumped and scrambled around Blaise, who felt the urge to sneer at them.

The teen had slid down the wall and sat on the floor, his head in his hands. “Thanks,” he finally said with a Northern accent. When he looked up, Harry saw his eyes were no longer black, but hazel. “I didn’t want to”—

“I know,” interrupted Harry. “I could see that.”

The four boys waited until the older teen could stand up on his own. When he finally rose, he nodded at them and held out a hand. Harry blinked, watching briefly as a dark emotion crossed the teen’s face.

“I understand, most don’t wish to touch us…”

Harry shook his head, blushing slightly. “I was kind of waiting for your name.”

Blaise groaned. “You bloody tosser,” he muttered.

Draco and Theo laughed, and the teen smiled slightly. He held his hand out again and said, “Erik Munsö.”

Harry shook his hand, “Harry Potter.”

Behind him, he dimly noted the laughter had stopped; turning, he saw Draco and Theo looking both gob-smacked and even Blaise looked horror struck.

“Bloody hell,” murmured Theo, eyes wide. Then, he blushed red and quickly bowed, with Draco and Blaise also bending at the waist.

What? thought Harry, completely confused.

“Harry!” Blaise hissed, glancing up and seeing his friend still standing next to Erik. “Bow!”

Confused, Harry turned to the teen and saw his uncomfortable look. “Please don’t,” the teen sighed. “Really.”

Theo, Draco and Blaise rose from the bow, still staring.

“They didn’t know who you were, your grace,” Draco gibbered, suddenly not as composed as before. “I assure you that I’ll have a talk with them.”

The teen waved his hand. “Um, really, it’s not necessary...”

“Will someone tell me what the hell is going on?” Harry demanded, his eyes moving from his best friend, to Hogwarts mates, and then to Erik.

Blaise choked. “Harry... both you and his grace forgot to mention any titles in your introduction... I know you don’t like them... but it would be best if you be a little more careful around his highness.”

“His highness?” echoed Harry, looking at Erik. “You’re royalty?”

Erik sighed, running a hand through his dirty blond, wavy hair. He stuck his hand out again. Harry took it, watching carefully as Erik said, “Prince Erik Munsö, heir to the Denmark crown.” At Harry’s blank stare, he amended, “The magical one.”

A blush crept up Harry's neck and cheeks and finally ears; he did manage a short, sharp bow and introduced himself, "Lord Harry James Potter, the Duke of Ashbourne, Boy-Who-Lived."

"So you're the ruling body here in England," Erik commented thoughtfully.

"Hardly," dryly replied Harry, "I'm twelve."

Erik laughed and the tension of being with a royal melted.

"I must go – my parents will be waiting for me," he said finally, after a few minutes of small talk. He turned and was ready to walk away when he paused, and said, almost flippantly, "By the way, there are talks for the location of the Quidditch World Cup, and that England is bidding on it... the European Cup is this summer though, and Denmark has won the bid to host. If I send you some tickets, will you come?"

Blaise's jaw dropped and Harry smiled. "I think I can say we'd happily agree."

Erik nodded, and left, leaving behind the four teens completely shell-shocked.

"You know," began Draco hesitantly, his eyes darting around a bit before his voice dropped to a whisper, "for someone with vampire blood in him, he isn't such a bad guy."

Harry and Blaise shared a look and small smile as they left the hallway and went back to the ballroom. Perhaps Malfoy could learn, after all.

As they approached the buffet table, they were greeted by Neville and Mario.

"There you are!" commented Neville, a tart in hand. "We thought you forgot us and Mario was hungry."

Mario swallowed his cracker and cheese piece and asked petulantly, "What took you so long?"

Blaise grinned wickedly and said, "You'll never believe us..."

Like promised, Paulo took Harry, Blaise and Mario to Diagon Alley in January. Once again, Blaise and Harry were more than slightly grumpy due to be denied a hangover potion; they had ignored Paulo's warning from last year and had gone back to their shed on the Zabini land and were now paying for it.

"Honestly, if you two continue with the champagne, I'm going to have to hide it all and instruct the house elves not to let you near it!" Paulo was grouching, while Harry and Blaise brooded and Mario ignored them. "Yet again, I find the two of you passed out in the shed at noon, worrying myself sick in case you had alcohol poisoning..."

He sighed and looked at the two who were not even listening to him anymore – he had been going on about this since they woke up. "Look," he finally said, running a hand over his mouth briefly. "I understand, I really do... and I want you two to be careful... and at the rate you're going, you'll both be alcoholics before you're sixteen. I understand everyone has a vice – one that keeps them going, but for goodness sake... Harry... you cannot let it rule your life!"

"No, everyone else does a fine job of that," the teen mumbled and Blaise scowled at the reference.

"We know what we're doing, Father," Blaise grumbled moodily, his hands deep in his trouser pockets. He shot a look at his father, who had his lips drawn tight and worry lines around his eyes. "It doesn't get out of hand. We only do it at New Years, nowhere else."

Paulo's eyebrows shot up. "Not even after a Quidditch or football win?"

Harry shook his head, and then groaned. "The Twins usually bring stuff in but we avoid it. "Jesus, we're only twelve."

Paulo's eyes narrowed as he looked from his son to his son's best friend, and if he were honest, whom he considered to be another son. "All right," he finally conceded. "If you do drink – which I sincerely hope you will not until you are much, much older – do it in moderation and please, for the love of Merlin, have Hermione and Susan with you. They'll keep the two of you from doing something stupid."

"That shows such faith in Neville and Dean," commented Blaise laughingly as they walked up the steps to Gringott's.

Paulo scowled. "They're teenage boys, just like you two, and since you're the leaders of your pack, they'll happily follow whatever you do!"

Harry broke away from the Zabini family and walked to a teller he vaguely recognized from his last visit. Sliding his key across the top, he said, "Hello Goblin Gnashtooth," and then added in halting Gobbledegook, "May your wealth prosper?"

The goblin gave a toothy grin and answered, "Hello Lord Potter. Are you here for a withdrawal?"

Harry nodded. "And I'd like to see Wallace, if he's available?"

Gnashtooth nodded. "He is. I will send him a notice of your arrival. Would you like your money now, sir?"

"Afterwards, I'd like to see Wallace," replied Harry, thoughtfully.

"Of course," Gnashtooth replied smoothly, handing Harry back his key. "You know the way, Lord Potter. May your wealth add to mine," he finished in Gobbledegook.

As Harry turned and was ready to walk away, he turned back and asked, "How was my pronunciation?"

Gnashtooth smirked. "A little harsher on your 'r's and weaker on your 's's, but I understand for a Parsletongue that is not easy."

Harry thanked him again and walked down the off-side hallway to Archibald Wallace's office. He knocked on the door and was bid to enter.

"Hello Harry," greeted Wallace happily, leaning heavily on his cane. "It's good to see you again."

"You too, Wallace," answered Harry, sitting in the offered chair. "I looked over that report you sent me with the stocks? I brought my reply here so you'll know which to sell and buy."

"Excellent, excellent," the old wizard beamed, settling behind his desk. He took the paper Harry offered him. "Is there anything else I can do for you today, Harry?"

Harry flushed, but cleared his throat and nodded. "Umm... yes, there is actually... it's not really... financial... but..."

"Well, out with it boy, unless you'll begin to stammer like Rex," laughed Wallace roughly. He began coughing.

"I was wondering if I could go to my Family Vault and see if there are any pictures of my parents," Harry let out in a rush.

Wallace fell silent, sadly regarding the young heir in front of him. He sighed. "Oh, Master Potter... you have so little to remind yourself of them, do you?" he stood and motioned Harry to join him. "We'll go together to your vault."

Griphook was waiting for Harry at the entrance of the mine, and waited until both Harry and Wallace were comfortably seated before taking off. The ride went faster and was smoother than Harry remembered, and soon they were in front of the Potter family vault.

"I'm afraid not many of your parents' personal items survived that night," began Wallace hesitantly as Harry placed his hand on the crest of Potter. The double doors to the vault opened silently. Both walked in.

“Some, however, were spelled to return here should your parents pass on.” Wallace pointed to the same area where Harry found his father’s school journals. “There ought to be some things of theirs there.”

Harry nodded and together the two crouched and began to search the trunks. Finally, Wallace let out a soft, “ah ha!”

“What did you find?” asked Harry.

In Wallace’s hand was a tiny, silver oval disk attached to a silver chain, in the shape of the Potter crest and bearing the Coat of Arms. “Your father gave this to your mother as a Honeymoon gift. It was well known in the magical community that he had this commissioned for her.”

Harry took the necklace from Wallace and found a small latch; he popped it open and blinked back tears. Inside the locket was a picture of his parents, holding a young Harry in their arms as they cuddled together.

Harry closed his eyes and clutched the locket to his chest, smiling softly. He then undid the clasp and placed it around his neck, letting the disk fall between his collar bones, cool and hidden against his skin.

“I shall make some enquires about finding you a Pensieve, Lord Potter,” said Wallace formally, drawing Harry from the locket. “And I will see if I can find friends’ and teachers’ of your parents so that you can have some memories of them.”

“Paulo Zabini said he’d do the same,” whispered Harry. He wiped his eyes and stood, clearing his throat. He then turned to Griphook and said, “I need to go to my Trust Vault now to remove some money.”

“I think it will be all right for you to take what you need and we’ll transfer the funds back here from your Trust,” assured Griphook, his pointy ears twitching slightly. Harry nodded his thanks.

Grabbing some galleons, he shoved them into his money pouch and turned back to Wallace. "I'm done here."

Wallace nodded and followed Harry from his vault, and then sat quietly next to the teen.

Harry was holding a fisted hand just under his neck, where the necklace lay. It was the best gift he could've ever received, and the perfect way to end the holidays.

AN: Dec.09.06 Oh boy... did school ever take a number out on me. Ugh, even now, on Christmas Break, I'm dying. Three essays to write, Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton," Bank's "Sweet Hereafter," and Naipaul's "Miguel Street" to read all before January 3rd!

There should be more updates this break, considering I've been buggered over at work. Also, socially, my life has changed with a two-year relationship ending (I did the ending V.V) and hanging out more with new friends made in classes.

I hope you like this chapter... I like it better than the last, because of the interaction of Harry, Blaise, Draco and Theo. Any suggestions on improving do let me know – also, I've noticed that I like long sentences. If there are any that are particularly confusing, point them out and I'll change them. – Kneazle

Chapter Fourteen

As school began for Wyckham and Hogwarts students, the weather turned cold and several feet of snow were heard to have covered Hogwarts – yet Wyckham had nothing except amusement.

The professors handed back their midterm test results – Harry received straight A's which he was very pleased to see – and Oliver upped the training for football and Quidditch. The Junior Quidditch League's process of elimination would begin within the next month and the Pirates were hoping to go back to Hogwarts to kick more arse.

In history, Professor Lenoir began them on the different magical races and their cultures; Harry was not surprised to learn about the house elves and their special brand of magic. Once the class was over, and the new Marauders were going to the Café for lunch, did Hermione speak up.

"Do you remember your birthday party, Harry?" she asked, with a frown on her face.

"Yeah," the black-haired teen replied, confused. He hitched his shoulder up to get a better grip on his bag.

"Well, what do you think happened to that house elf that visited you?" she continued.

Blaise began laughing. "You mean that one who told Harry not to go to Hogwarts?"

Susan, Dean and Neville began chuckling; they too remembered the hyper elf.

Harry frowned. "His master probably did something to him... and I'd really rather not think about that. Some families can treat house elves horribly."

"True," agreed Susan conversationally; "I know that many lose their magic every year because they don't bond with their master. A good master boosts their magic... and bad one twists it."

Hermione shuddered, and a gleam appeared in her eyes.

Blaise and Harry shared a look and simultaneously sighed. No good was going to come of a Hermione Crusade.

Entering the Café, Dean and Susan secured their table – not that anyone else sat there, the school did know who that table belonged to – and waited patiently as Blaise, Harry, Neville and Hermione went to the buffet line.

Harry picked up his plate, and turned to Hermione. “All right, spit it out; what’s got your knickers in a twist?”

Hermione blushed slightly and mock glared at her friend. “House elves!”

“Yes, Hermione, we know that. But why?” asked a patient Blaise, standing in front of Harry, who was in front of Hermione. He hadn’t even turned around to address his friend.

Instead, Blaise was piling fried potatoes and assorted veggies on his plate. At Harry’s strange look, he shrugged. “Mum would kill me if she knew I wasn’t eating my vegetables.”

Hermione huffed and opened her mouth. “House elves are treated as slaves. They have no rights, no freedoms, are considered below witches and wizards!”

“And have you seen most house elves, Hermione?” inputted Neville calmly, adding some sausages to his plate next to a salad. “They love cooking and cleaning. Just ask the house elves here. Floppy is a good example of a house elf that loves helping others. He’s helped Blaise and Harry enough over the school year with extra food.” He looked up and quirked an eyebrow. “And where did you think we got the food for your birthday that you so enjoyed?”

Hermione blushed and kept silent, moving down the buffet line with her friends as she thought things over. She was still silent as the foursome sat at their table, and Dean and Susan left.

Harry, Blaise and Neville kept conversation though, talking about the theory work and chapter they had to read for Professor Shacklebolt's Defense class next.

Even once lunch was over, Hermione remained uncharacteristically silent, although none of her friends bothered her or worried over it; she was deep in thought over what Neville had said earlier.

Defense was a two-hour lecture on new spells and techniques, and once it was over the boys were heading to their rooms to change for gym class. It was then that Hermione finally spoke.

"You're right," she said to Neville, quietly. "But that doesn't mean how the Purebloods treat them – as second-class citizens – is correct either."

"I'm sure if you speak to some of the professors, Hermione," began Susan kindly, "They'd help you form an organization to help abused house elves or speak to someone at the Ministry. I'm sure Auntie would help too."

Hermione beamed. She had a project.

And perhaps, thought Harry fondly as he smiled at his friend, it will direct some of her attention away from me.

Harry continued to eat properly, under Blaise's watchful eyes and weekly, motherly letters from Heather. Hedwig was happy to finally have something to deliver during school, so Harry allowed her to stay with the Woolworths since if he had anything to write he could send it with Marius, Blaise's eagle.

As January melted away, Harry's wordless spell casting lessons with Kingsley Shacklebolt continued, Nicolas Flamel began to ease Harry into Occlumency, and Oliver Wood declared that Harry had to catch the snitch "or die trying!" against the Monsters.

Harry did catch the snitch, within thirty minutes of the beginning of the match, but suffered a broken nose and nasty bruise on his chin. He looked as though he was in a bar fight.

Healer McMillan muttered dangerously under her breath about 'idiotic, rough sports that all stupid men had to play to show off' but Harry's chin bruise was significantly reduced (just a bit sore, from a Quaffle in the face – don't ask) and his broken nose was set and the blood stopped. However, Harry did now have a roguish bump in his nose bridge that Susan giggled over.

Harry was gingerly petting his nose in the Café that evening for dinner, moping slightly at the dark bruised circles under his eyes, when Luna, Colin, Donald and Jens greeted him.

"Great play, Duke!" congratulated Colin, grinning widely. "That dive you made was spectacular!"

"Except for the part where Alicia missed the Quaffle and it hit you dead on," cheerfully added Luna. Jens nodded violently, messing up his hair.

"I quite liked that Wronski Feint you made, Duke!" chirped in Donald, his hands still shaking from adrenaline. Harry wondered briefly if he ate sugar packets hourly. "Pulling up within a foot of the ground, wow! Can you teach me to do that?"

"Maybe when you're a bit older, Donald, and your parents wouldn't try to kill me," answered Harry wryly. "Thanks, though."

The four first years replied in kind, and left, except for Luna, who joined them at their table. For the most part, the group ignored her but tolerated her odd turn of phrases – they were, after all, quite amusing, although it exasperated Hermione to no end which was almost more amusing than Luna's comments.

The Pirates Quidditch team was again, in the clear lead to beat out of the other Wyckham Teams to represent the school at the JQL, and some didn't even try to beat the near unstoppable team. Many just played for the chance to play and hone their own skills.

In February, mid-month, the Quidditch game between the Pirates and the Brainiacs was moved inside to the enlarged gym due to freezing rain and a temperature of minus 10 degrees Celsius. There was something special about this game, though: firstly, it would be the first one held inside the school gym, and secondly, it was the first game that outsiders could come to watch.

As such, Heather and Robert had announced to Harry in a letter the previous week that they'd be there to see his game. In result, Harry was a nervous wreck. He never had family come to watch him at anything before. His Aunt and Uncle certainly never had, and Harry felt the pounding of his heart echo loudly in his ears and felt the urge to show Heather and Robert just how good of a flyer he was.

Like all games at Wyckham, Quidditch matches were relatively clean – even though some teams like the Monsters and Sirens would push that.

Harry was high above the indoor pitch, nearly brushing the enchanted ceiling (one to make room for the regulation height of a pitch and to show the nasty weather outside). He was circling lazily, watching the game from a hawk's perspective.

Alicia, Blaise and Angelina passed the Quaffle in a V-formation, effectively blocking the opposite team from grabbing the ball. Oliver was hollering unintelligible instructions from the three posts, flying agitatedly back and forth.

Harry narrowed his eyes and focused on a tiny speck hovering above the west stands. It was the snitch.

Harry leaned against his broom, parallel to it, and shot off like a rocket toward the stands, his eyes glued to the snitch. Any way it moved, he'd have it covered and he instinctively knew he wouldn't hit anyone in the stands.

Sensing his approach, the Snitch shuddered in its place for a moment. It then shot off to the left, away from the crowd and sped erratically in a zigzag pattern across the bottom of the pitch.

Harry followed it, unaware of the roar of the crowd and the flashing of light bulbs; somehow, the press had come to watch him play Quidditch.

The Snitch changed direction again, mere inches from Harry's reaching fingertips. It shot up, a ninety-degree change that had Harry clutching his broom as he followed, eyes narrowed in concentration. Again, the snitch changed, going down.

Harry was beginning to get sea-sick and annoyed. Understanding physical mass and weight and gravity, Harry closed his eyes briefly, opened them, and let go of his broom.

He began to freefall, ignoring the gasps and cries of the crowd. The Snitch was now unsure of the flying figure without a broom, and going much slower than it usually could, wondering if it should just hover. Harry reached out and grabbed it, just as he thought as hard as he could: Accio broom!

His broom shot downward, and Harry grabbed on with one hand, dangling from the end with the snitch in his left hand, slowing to a stop and finally hovering thirty feet above the ground.

The crowd erupted into cheers; flashes from reporters caused Harry to see spots and his ears were ringing and he was sweating.

Fred and George, with wide smiles on their faces, soared at Harry and helped him back on his broom, and then Alicia, Angelina, Oliver and Blaise were crowding him, a tangle of legs and arms and broomsticks and beater's bats, slowing falling to the ground in a human ball.

The referee caught their attention and motioned for them to get changed in the locker room; it seemed that the crowd of reporters (and apparently Ministry officials) was eager to meet Harry and the Pirates team.

He was still flushed when the rest of the team and Harry stepped out of the locker rooms, back into the enlarged gym. The first to greet him was Heather and Robert, and Paulo and Francesca Zabini.

“Harry!” cried Heather breathlessly, grabbing him and crushing him into her arms, tightly. “That was – oh my – I can’t even begin! – how amazing – what were you thinking?!”

Robert laughed and as Heather held Harry at an arm’s length to check him for scrapes and bruises, Robert cuffed Harry gently on his shoulder. “Absolutely amazing, Harry, amazing!”

Francesca and Heather began bemoaning about how Harry was going to give them gray hair, and Blaise scowled beside his friend.

“You’d think you’re their son instead of me,” he grouched in jest, sticking his tongue out at his father when Paulo winked at Harry and Blaise saw.

Soon the Zabini and Woolworth families left after meeting the rest of the team, with promises to send a letter as soon as possible and treats for the two boys. In their place was a large contingent of reporters and the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge himself.

“Harry, my boy!” the man greeted the Boy-Who-Lived, shaking his hand as the reporters caught the moment. “Wonderful game! Absolutely smashing, I haven’t seen moves like that since seeing a game held by the English League! I dare say they’ll be sending you a letter soon!”

Harry forced a weak smile and laugh. “Possibly, but I’m only twelve, so it would cause some legal ramifications.”

They both laughed falsely, and soon reporters were crowding around Harry and the team, asking questions. Oliver happily took most of the questions unless they were specifically for a team members, which the reporters did ask. However, Harry was happy to note that they were splitting their questions equally between the teammates and not just at him.

Exhausted, Harry and Blaise finally excused themselves and trudged wearily to their room, where their friends were waiting.

Seeing their expressions, though, Hermione stood and announced, "We'll talk to you two later. Sleep well!"

Harry smiled gratefully at his friend and Blaise even hugged her; both, however, fell straight to their beds with their sweaty change of clothes, as they were wont to do.

It was, after all, something they were used to, but wouldn't change for anything in the world.

Thousands of miles away, located somewhere in the North Sea, off the coast of Scotland, was a secret island. That island had one building on it, and it was a perpetually cold place where hate and fear and anger bred. The building on that secret island was known as Azkaban.

Monthly, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge would travel to the island and inspect the condition of high profile prisoners, and not one of them freaked him out more than the notorious Sirius Black.

The man had been in Azkaban since he was twenty-two, and had spent a decade in close proximity with Dementors, some of the vilest creatures Fudge knew. It was a miracle that Black hadn't gone insane like the others, lost in the horrors of his own memories. In fact, Black was scarily sane and normal, but on the other hand, Fudge was slightly glad to have someone to speak to.

The wizard guards were freaky enough as it was. Sirius Black could at least hold a normal, polite conversation.

It was March 6, 1993, and Fudge carried a previous edition of the Daily Prophet with him. As it was his custom, since becoming Minister and visiting Azkaban, Sirius Black always asked for Fudge's newspaper when he was done his rounds. Fudge had then taken it upon himself – as an act of charity and kindness (although why he

would never be able to explain to anyone) – to make Sirius Black's cell his last stop, and spent a few minutes speaking to the Death Eater.

This time, as he entered the black building, he wondered if Harry Potter knew Sirius Black was his godfather.

Fudge was actually lost in his thoughts, barely glancing at the other prisoners – Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband and brother-in-law, Barty Crouch Junior, Hamilton Banks, Emilio Sanchez, Michel Dubois; some Death Eaters, others petty criminals, other innocent – until he reached Sirius Black's cell.

The man looked thinner than he had the previous month, but his cheeks seemed slightly rosy. His hair was still a mess, growing quickly again, and his new Azkaban robes were helping to fight the chill.

"Hello Black," began Fudge, hesitantly. The man hadn't looked up at his approach.

Finally, after a few minutes, he did look up. His eyes seemed haunted but still showed intelligence and coherence. "Fudge."

"Same old?" the pudgy man tried to joke. It was weak, and stupid, and he knew it. Black raised an eyebrow and Fudge flushed. He cleared his throat and reached for the newspaper held against his side under his arm. "I've got a special edition of the Prophet for you."

"Unless it says Peter Pettigrew is still alive, caught, and admitted under Veritaserum that I'm innocent, I'd rather not read it," sighed Black, curling himself into a ball on his cot.

Fudge frowned. Maybe Black wasn't as sane as he previously thought. Pettigrew was dead, and he killed the man. "Well, since I remember you saying you like doing the crosswords, I'll still leave it for you. And it was a special edition of the Prophet because it has the annual Sunshine Witch in it. I thought you might like it to cheer you up."

Flustered, the Minister rocked slightly on his heels and then sighed. He turned, ready to leave, and finally said, "I've included the sports section, Black. Your godson is in it. If you feel anything for the boy at all and truly aren't guilty, I figured you might enjoy knowing what he's been up to."

As there was no reaction from Black, Fudge sighed. "Very well. I won't make the same foolish mistake again next time. Enjoy you day, Black."

Sirius Black did not look up from the floor of his cell until he could no longer hear the guard or Fudge's steps. Once he was sure they were gone, he stretched slowly, reached for the paper, and went straight to the crossword section. He was reading the clues when he sighed and impatiently and angrily flipped to the sports section, sure Fudge was pulling his tail.

But there, in a full page spread, was the title: Harry Potter and school Quidditch Team Unstoppable!

There was a single picture of Harry, leaning against another boy his age with his arm around his godson; Harry was looking directly at the camera and was eerily still, his eyes bright and attentive, while his friends' eyes were closed in laughter and his body shook. They wore standard Quidditch gear, and Sirius couldn't tell what house he was in. Beside their picture was the caption: Harry Potter and best friend Blaise Zabini celebrate another Quidditch victory together on Feb. 20, 1993.

The other picture was a team one; the names below in the picture read: Captain Oliver Wood (16), Chasers Angelina Johnson (14), Alicia Spinnet (13), Blaise Zabini (12); Beaters Fred and George Weasley (14) and Seeker Harry Potter (12).

Feeling tears well up in his eyes, Sirius inhaled deeply through his nose and leaned his head back against the cool stone to compose himself.

Harry looked happy and Sirius was not going to jeopardize that for his own satisfaction. He folded the sports section carefully, ready to open

it up again at a moments' notice to stare at his godson who looked so much like his dead best friend.

After a few moments, he went to another section – News – and breezed through the articles until one caught his eye.

Arthur Weasley (44) and his family outside their home in Ottery St. Catchpole, before Mr. Weasley was reprimanded for charming Muggle items for personal – and suspected Muggle – use.

And there, standing on the front steps of the Burrow, were nine people, and one rat with a missing finger.

Sirius let out a howl of rage.

By the morning of March 7, 1993, everyone would know that Sirius Black, Voldemort's right-hand man, Godfather of Harry Potter the Boy-Who-Lived had escaped the inescapable Azkaban Fortress.

It was Professor Hartz who told Harry to stay in the classroom once the class was over. English was first on Monday mornings, and Harry agreed with much confusion.

"You... won't be going to history, Harry," Hartz said slowly, rubbing her temples. "Do you want to talk in my office or here?"

"I don't know," replied Harry. "What do you suggest?"

"Best here, so if there is any talk in the halls it won't bother you as much," she finally muttered, sitting heavily into her desk chair.

Harry moved to the front of the class, sitting in Su Li's normal spot. He clasped his hands together and waited for Hartz to begin.

"Do you know who Sirius Black is?" she asked.

“Um, I think so,” began Harry slowly. “He was my dad’s best friend. I have some of their books and a copy of my parents’ will. He’s my godfather, but I don’t know where he is.”

Hartz sighed. “That’s... a pretty good description. The biggest thing is that no one wanted to tell you that Black is your godfather, and there is a reason why he wasn’t around to take care of you.”

“And you know?” asked Harry through narrowed eyes. He did not like it when information was kept from him.

“I honestly thought you’d have uncovered it by now, considering Susan’s aunt is Amelia Bones and three of your friends are pureblooded.”

“Well?”

Hartz ran a hand through her brown hair and looked Harry straight in the eyes. “Sirius Black was convicted – without a trial – to Azkaban prison on November 2, 1981, where he lived for over a decade in the worst possible conditions.”

“Without a trial?” echoed Harry, anger strumming through his veins. “Without a trial? Who bloody allowed that?”

“Bartemius Crouch, who was the head of the Auror Department at the time, until his own son was convicted of being a Death Eater,” wearily replied Anita Hartz. “Just after you defeated Voldemort, the wizard world was in a state of euphoria. Voldemort was gone, his followers were scattered, and for Aurors, it was a race against time to find these Death Eaters before their marks faded.”

Harry stood and walked unsteadily to the classroom window, looking out at the grey sky and brick work of the west wing.

“But without a trial?”

“Everyone believed he was your parents’ secret keeper, and that he betrayed them,” answered Hartz. Harry glanced over his shoulder at her and caught on to what she didn’t say.

“Not everyone believed it, did they?” he asked quietly.

Hartz shook her head. “His trial is one of the first that Professor Worthington covers in the politics class. There was no trial, no evidence but speculation and hearsay; Sirius wasn’t allowed to speak and the only witnesses to his confrontation with Peter Pettigrew were non-magical people who had their memories erased almost immediately.”

“That... that is... intolerable!” burst out Harry, turning around quickly and facing his Headmistress. “The wizard world is a joke! Did they check for the Dark Mark? Use Veritaserum? Read my parents’ wills?”

“No,” answered Hartz softly. “Why did you think I started this school, Harry? Because I was a Muggle caught between the Death Eaters one day? No. Because I saw how the wizard world’s children grew up and what they were taught at Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Drumstrang and I didn’t like it one bit.

“I know I think strangely, and that people won’t agree with me, but something had to be done, because this world needs a change. A serious one! Their judicial system, the corruption in the Ministry, the curriculum at Hogwarts ignoring the non-magical world and the things that they have, when added to the magical – it’s brilliant! Chemistry plus potions? Charms and transfiguration plus physics? It broadens the mind and the horizon, something that I don’t see from the current wizards and witches in power.”

She took a deep breath, blushing sheepishly as she realized she rose from her seat in passion. Harry was staring at her.

Sitting down, and breathing deeply, Hartz continued, “The wizard world will die out if they do not change their ways. The majority of the community is related to each other, did you know that?”

“Kind of, Blaise was mentioning it,” answered Harry.

Hartz laughed. “Would you believe that your fourth cousin is Draco Malfoy from the Cygnus Black family line?”

Harry looked surprised. "Really?"

Hartz nodded. "Really. I helped one of our graduate students this past summer on their thesis work for squibs and family lines dying out. We got to look at a lot of family lines."

Harry smiled, shrugging slightly. "Interesting, but what does that have to do with Sirius?"

Hartz took another deep breath. "He's now an escaped convict. One that I personally believe was wrongly accused. You have your parents' will, which states explicitly that Sirius Black was not the secret keeper..."

Harry's mouth dropped open slightly. His eyes widened and he then snapped his mouth shut so hard his teeth clacked together.

He nodded at Hartz. "May I be excused to make a Floo call to my accountant? I think I need a referral for a good solicitor and lawyer."

Hartz nodded and shooed him out of the room.

"Harry?" she called.

He turned around from the door.

"Don't let anyone know. Save the punch for later," she advised. Harry grinned.

The weather turned balmy and spring began to settle in southern England. Harry and his friends, shortly after Harry learned of Sirius Black's escape, sat outside on the newly-opened patio outside the Café at Wyckham that Friday afternoon, the 11th, speaking of nothing in particular until Sirius Black came up.

"I just don't get it," he continued, taking up their recent conversation. He had some information from Hartz, like Sirius Black was his

godfather and an escaped convict who – apparently – wanted to kill him. “So Sirius Black is after me. Why? I didn’t see anything in the books I read from father that would show I ruined his life.”

Blaise, Neville and Susan shared a troubled glance. “The thing is, Harry,” began Blaise, as Harry’s best friend, “the reason no one will want to tell you is because of the closeness he shared with your father.”

“What?” asked Harry, flabbergasted. So what if they were as good as brother; it was the same for Harry and Blaise. However, Harry also had spoken to Hartz that Monday and a tiny, evil part of him wanted to see what his friends would say and where they would fall – would they believe the crap the Ministry gave the public? “What do you mean?”

Susan wet her lips and continued. A chilly breeze brushed against her hair, and she burrowed deeper into her winter coat. “Sirius Black and your dad were best friends, Harry.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much,” said Harry. “Dumbledore told me the reason he couldn’t take care of me was because he was ‘indisposed.’”

Neville frowned but picked up the conversation: “When Voldemort came after your family and mine, your parents decided to go under the Fidelius charm for protection.”

“The—”

“It’s telling someone a secret and keeping that secret in a living person. Only that person can divulge the location of a person or family. Voldemort could walk right up to your sitting room window, Harry, and not see the Potters!” exclaimed Hermione, eyes bright from sharing some special, obscure knowledge. “But what does that have to do with Black?”

“He was the Potters secret keeper,” replied Susan quietly. “And he sold Harry’s parents to Voldemort. He’s Voldemort’s right-hand man.”

"I thought that was Lucius Malfoy," interjected Dean, wryly. "He certainly fits it with his 'I am holy, I am a pureblood' attitude." He glanced at his pureblood friends, especially Blaise. "No offense."

"None taken," the three chimed with flashed smiles at their friend.

"You'll find mention of Sirius Black in the Daily Prophet just a few days after Halloween 1981," continued Blaise, quietly.

Blaise's best friend was pale and tired, with dark circles under his eyes and a tick forming under one; he wanted answers and did not enjoy the adult figures in his life keeping secrets about his life. Since Hartz had let him know, Harry had spent many nights in the library looking at previous periodicals and had so far come up with nothing that would help his lawyers.

"I looked. I hadn't connected the name until now. Blew up twelve people, and Peter Pettigrew is a key name, as he died." Harry said instead, using what information he did know.

Susan nodded, placing a hand over Harry's. "Pettigrew was a friend of your parents as well, and Black killed him. They were shouting before it happened."

Harry frowned, casting a speculative glance at his friends from under his fringe. "It's weird though."

Hermione perked up. "Weird?"

Harry nodded, still in thought. "When I went to my parents' vault and read their will, they made Sirius my godfather should anything happen to them. My dad also wrote that Sirius moved in with my grandparents after his family kicked him out and disowned him."

Blaise tapped a finger to his chin, as Neville glanced about the patio at the other students doing work or chatting nearby. No one was listening in to their conversation.

"The Blacks were a prominent, pureblood family that hated Muggleborns and anything that was non-magical." Blaise frowned,

trying to remember important details that might ease Harry's state of mind. "They disowned Andromeda Black when she married a Muggle; I remember my parents mentioning it before in passing. They have a daughter, I think, who is still at Hogwarts."

"That doesn't exactly sound as though Sirius Black was a 'dark arts' practitioner then," murmured Dean slowly.

Dean didn't want to upset his friends: ever since entering the magical world, he found that wizards were fairly strict and rigid in their beliefs and prejudices. Wyckham was the lone exception to that train of thought, and slowly his friends were learning the concept of critical thinking, which Dean was hoping he was showing now.

Harry agreed. "No, it doesn't. I would like to think that my dad knew Sirius Black well enough – especially since they lived together since they were eleven, and my dad titled Sirius his brother once or twice in the will."

"Is it possible that he was framed then?" asked Hermione.

Susan nodded. "It could be. He wasn't allowed a trial."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, I had heard and read that. How nice; the wizard world has Veritaserum, and could learn if someone was a Death Eater or not by administering it, but no, they're so god-damn prejudice that they can't look past their own bloody noses!"

"That bothers me as well," admitted Hermione. "The wizard world has all the means to be a Utopian society and yet is almost far worse off than any corrupt, war-infected country I can think of!"

Blaise shrugged. "It's a good thing we're at Wyckham then, seeing as they teach us to think differently than Hogwarts."

Harry stopped Blaise before he could get into a full-blown rant, as he was ought to do. "Well, that's good and all, but that doesn't help my godfather if he really was set up."

“The best we can do,” offered Neville, “is reread the newspaper articles—” here Hermione snorted and scowled; her dislike for the Daily Prophet and their slanderous articles was well-known at Wyckham “—and see if Susan can get her Aunt to give us his report file.”

Susan started. “What? No, no way. Auntie would crucio me!”

Neville shook his head. “Not if you say it’s because you want Harry to be prepared; especially if Sirius Black is out to get him!”

Susan sighed. “I really have no choice, do I? I want Harry safe just like everyone else, and by saying no, I’m ignoring my friends’ safety.”

Harry squeezed the hand that was still covering his. “Susan, if you feel uncomfortable, then don’t do it. None of us will think any less of you.”

A quick glance at Blaise’s face made Harry rethink that sentence.

That evening at dinner, there was a Sirius Black sighting in Glasgow. The wizard world was on high alert, ready to find that mass murderer and stick him back in Azkaban without a hesitated thought. Harry and his friends, however, were a bit more wary.

Harry and Hermione managed to find the old Daily Prophet articles on the case, and as he was Harry’s godfather and James Potter’s best friend, it made the front page. However, the more Harry read it the more he began to hate the wizard worlds’ bureaucratic hypocrisy and the need to save each others arses.

Within days of their talk on the patio, Amelia Bones sent the case report on Sirius Black to Harry and his friends via the Bones family owl. The group crowded around it, and read over the Auror’s notes, the wiped memories before a testimony could be taken from the Muggles, etc.

Harry took out his frustration against the wizard world on the Quidditch and football field; he received more yellow cards that season than he had the year before (although he was just a reserve earlier) and was perpetually angry.

The state of the wizard world was tense; those students petrified at Hogwarts had yet to wake up, and the school was under a state of constant fear that the Heir of Slytherin would get them next. Half-blood and Purebloods distanced themselves from their muggleborn friends and did not associate with those of “lesser blood” anymore. There had already been several parents taking a tour of Wyckham with young, awed and sullen witches and wizards from Hogwarts.

Harry was sure Voldemort was behind the Heir of Slytherin thing at Hogwarts, but it wasn't his concern. Sirius Black, however, was. Reconstructing the timeframe with his friends, Harry realized he was dumped at the Dursley residence before Sirius Black was caught and taken to Azkaban – meaning someone circumvented his parents will. Harry knew it was Dumbledore; the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot held the power to be the executer of wills, but he had to follow it to a T.

It seemed more and more that someone was orchestrating things behind the scenes – paying people to keep quiet, for things to be forgotten and others to be mentioned first. Since it was revolving around Harry, the teen in question was beginning to feel the stirrings of panic.

The prophecy surrounding his birth – and Neville's – and Dumbledore's complete and utter lack of unwavering faith in it made Harry realize that things were going to get worse for him as Voldemort tried more and more to gain power and return to his previous power base.

Harry had to make some fast decisions and secure allies where he could before things became too politically hot.

The unfortunate part was that the Ministry was already involved in Harry's life. The Minister had already offered a 24/7 bodyguard for Harry at Wyckham, but he declined; then the Minister and

Dumbledore tried to force Hartz and Flamel to have Dementors and Aurors guard the school perimeter, but both Headmistress and Deputy denied that forcefully.

“For Harry’s protection,” the two wizards pleaded; “Black is a merciless killer, he’ll use Harry to avenge his Master’s death.”

Harry wasn’t buying that. Neither were his friends, nor Hartz and Flamel. By the end of the night, they were sent packing and defeated back to Hogwarts to deal with the Heir of Slytherin situation, which hadn’t improved.

A few weeks after Sirius Black’s escape overshadowed the recent attack on a Muggleborn at Hogwarts, Harry found himself in the library with his new Marauders, at three in the morning. All of them were looking for loopholes that would give Sirius Black at trial – for Harry, it would mean at least knowing if the man was innocent or not. Susan and Neville were reviewing the report file, which was nearly useless, while Harry, Blaise, Dean and Hermione were looking over James Potter’s will, school books, and Lily Evan’s diary.

So far, nothing had come up stating Sirius Black was disloyal – but it would not hold up in a court of law due to connection Harry’s parents had with Black.

“This is insane,” muttered Harry, moaning softly and letting his head fall on the book he was reading. “We’ll never find anything!”

“Don’t give up,” automatically replied Hermione, without moving her eyes from the page she was at. She rubbed at one eye, but did not stop. The group fell silent, listening to the echoing tick-tick-tick of a clock somewhere in the hallway.

“Hi Duke!”

The group jumped in surprise; Neville dropped a heavy tome which echoed ominously in the deserted library.

Luna Lovegood wore a bright yellow housecoat and fuzzy duck-faced slippers; her wand was tucked in her make-shift bun and she still wore her turnip earrings.

“Luna,” began a shocked Harry. “What are you doing up?”

“The Fizzledibizzers were causing problems outside the window. I couldn’t sleep or make them go away without waking my dorm mate,” the girl replied, her eyes vaguely moving across the group. “What are you doing? Looking up information on Sirius Black?”

Hermione protectively moved her arm to cover the material she was reading. Blaise blinked several times and then let his head fall into his hands.

“Yes,” sighed Harry finally, turning his emerald eyes on Luna, and pleading with her. “You won’t tell anyone what we’re doing, will you?”

Luna shook her head, making her straight blonde hair lift and settle a few moments later – like it was defying gravity on its own. “Not at all. But you’re looking in the wrong place!”

Silence.

“What?” asked Dean, in surprise.

“Daddy and I knew for ages, didn’t you?” she chirped, pulling out a rolled up copy of the Quibbler from her robe pocket. “Sirius Black leads a double life, as Stubby Boardman! He was with his girlfriend that night, so he couldn’t have possibly killed Peter Pettigrew.”

Harry and his friends stared in horror and surprise at the bright headline that ran across two pages: SIRIUS BLACK REALLY STUBBY BOARDMAN OF ‘HOBGOBLINS’ – WAS WITH GIRLFRIEND NIGHT OF NOV. 2!!

“Beside,” continued Luna, walking away from the group, “Peter Pettigrew isn’t dead.”

“How do you know that?” demanded Blaise, jumping to his feet and not bothering to keep his voice down, ignoring the “Shhh!” from his friends.

Luna smiled dreamily at Blaise. “Because everyone knows Peter Pettigrew was really attacked and kidnapped by three-toed Weaselbees to be their slave!”

The girl smiled brightly, and walked out of the library, humming lightly to herself, and left Harry and his friends gaping after her for several moments.

“She’s mental,” Blaise declared with finality. “Absolutely mental.”

As much as Harry liked Luna, he had to agree. The girl was something else altogether. But as Harry reviewed her strange conversation with his friends, he couldn’t help but smile.

Weaselbees, really!

AN: (Dec.15.06) For those who obviously misread the end of the previous chapter, for clarification: MUNSÖ IS NOT A VAMPIRE. HE HAS VAMPIRE BLOOD IN HIM, BUT THAT WAS PASSED DOWN THROUGH HIS BLOODLINE. Bloodlines are very important in Wyckham, due to social standings of characters and their political weight and how Harry fits in there as his role of a Duke.

Not my favourite chapter, but it is getting things rolling. Sirius Black is loose and after Harry – Pettigrew is at Hogwarts, where the Heir of Slytherin is still active! Oh no! And Harry has to realize that sooner or later, he might have to make some tough decisions.

Loose ends with the solicitors will be tied up in the next chapter. Enjoy!

AN2: I’m an English major. Not a Physics major. I changed Harry’s freefall because my science skillz suck like whoa. Nothing major – the Snitch is now dumber than normal.

Chapter Fifteen

April brought in tree buds and flowers, lots of rain, and a warm, Southern breeze from the sea. Harry continued to study, and continued to prove to Flamel and Shacklebolt that despite his worries over the Sirius Black affair, Harry could single-mindedly focus on his tasks.

Kingsley had commented that Harry was able to master short, intense bursts of wordless casting; had already proved this during a Quidditch match earlier on in the month, and was doing well against a Styrofoam dummy the Defense professor had conjured. His classroom and the dummy looked like a mess, with pieces of white foam floating in the air and covering the floor, and sticking out of empty arm sockets.

Rubbing his eyes tiredly, Shacklebolt sighed, "I think that's enough for tonight, Harry. You've decimated my dummy."

Sheepishly drawing his wand back to his holster, Harry let his eyes roam his target. The dummy was missing its arms, a leg, and his other hung precariously by the knee on an odd angle. The head was lolling to the side.

"Sorry?" answered Harry, with a slight smile.

"Indeed," muttered back Shacklebolt, waving his own wand. The blown-off limbs flew from the floor and reattached themselves to their body. "I think you've successfully managed to learn and use Reducto silently."

"Thanks," preened Harry with a blush.

Shacklebolt shot the twelve-year-old a rare, wide smile. "You're doing fine, Harry. Remember that you can take it slower, you're ages ahead of your Hogwarts year mates."

"I know," replied Harry softly. He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I just feel as though I need to do better than everyone else. Voldemort is older than me, and has had more time to practice."

Shacklebolt tried not to shudder at the name of the Dark Lord, and settled himself behind his desk, where he still had some papers to grade. “You’ll be catching up or learning something he doesn’t know with the rate you’re going. Don’t think too much on it – you kicked You-Know-Who’s ass last year, didn’t you? I think you’ll manage for another few years before he gets a body back and honest-to-Merlin duels you.”

“Thanks, Professor!” exclaimed Harry, picking up his book bag and heading toward the classroom door. “I’ll see you next week!”

Schoolwork was cut back for the Easter holidays, but this year many students decided to remain at the school. Another difference was that there were more adults around the school, as Flamel, Blake, or Hartz would give disillusioned parents a tour of the estate.

In mid-April, Cornelius Fudge, Albus Dumbledore, Jeffery Boyd the Headmaster of Aberclythe, Anita Hartz and another man in garish robes sat at a table in the Café, conversing quietly and seriously. The students did not know what to think of it, and proceeded to eat their dinner quietly.

Finally, Hartz rose and the Café fell silent.

“As many of you are aware,” she began seriously, “Hogwarts has been breached from the inside by the Heir of Slytherin, whoever they might be. As such, Minister Fudge, Headmasters Dumbledore and Boyd, and Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports Ludo Bagman and I have agreed to host this years’ Junior Quidditch Cup at Wyckham.”

The volume in the Café rose to new heights that it had never heard of before; students were cheering and hollering their victories already, congratulating the Headmasters for their esteemed choice, and generally being rowdy.

Harry, as well, was ecstatic. He wouldn't be going to Hogwarts this year, or have to deal with Albus Dumbledore any more than at a professional level.

"Alright, alright, settle down!" Hartz called, and then whistled loudly when she realized she was being ignored. The room instantly fell silent at the loud, sharp noise. Grinning, Hartz continued.

"Because of the horrible incidents occurring at Hogwarts, the date for the League has been moved from the first week in June to the first week in May, two weeks from now. Aberclythe's Quidditch team is already preparing, as is the Slytherin team from Hogwarts. I was saving our results for later, but I suppose now is as good a time as any to reveal which of Wyckham's teams will be playing."

The Café was so quiet, everyone could hear Flamel reach into his robes and hand Hartz a rolled up piece of parchment. She undid the ribbon holding it closed, and scrolled it, and smiled as she read it.

"And with great honour, yet again, I am pleased to announce that the team representing Wyckham will be..." she paused, letting the anticipation grow and the tension from the Quidditch players reach incredible heights.

"Just spit it out already!" finally wailed Oliver Wood, his face pale and standing from his seat, gripping the table tightly.

Hartz glanced over at the teen; Oliver flushed scarlet.

"The team representing Wyckham is... The Pirates – Oliver Wood, Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, Fred and George Weasley, Blaise Zabini and Harry Potter for a second year in a row!"

There was a cheer; Blaise and Harry were hugging each other tightly, and Fred and George were giving Oliver Wood a serious noogie.

"Pirates!" Oliver shouted over the cheer, catching his team's attention. "To the pitch! We have to practice!"

The team groaned while everyone else laughed; the school recognized the maniacal glint in Wood's eyes and felt sympathy for the team who now abandoned their half-eaten dinner for an impromptu Quidditch practice.

"It's going to be Wood who'll be the death of me," moaned Harry to Blaise as they walked to their room to change into their Quidditch jersey. "If he teams up with Voldemort, I'm doomed!"

Blaise just laughed and Harry pouted. Some help his best friend was.

On Sunday, May 2, Harry woke up to a loud bang. He sat upright in bed, his wand in his hand and his other rubbing at his eyes tiredly. Blaise, across the room, was slurring, "wha'? What's going on?" and was mechanically reaching for his uniform.

Harry yawned widely, sliding out of bed and moving to the open window. Hedwig had her head burrowed under her wing and was disgustingly unmoved by the loud sound, cooing softly as she slept; Harry glanced at her through the heavy black drawn curtain over her cage.

Flinging back the window curtain, Harry rubbed his eyes again and blinked stupidly at the back lawn of Wyckham Academy. "Blaise... wake up."

"I'm up," yawned Blaise, groping for his slippers under the bed. He toppled to the floor instead.

"C'mere!"

"What?"

Blaise grumbled as he moved unsteadily to the window, but upon reaching it paused in his grumbling to blink and stare.

"Is that the Knight Bus?" he asked finally.

Harry shrugged. "I've never seen it before," the black-haired boy replied. He was staring at a violently purple triple-decker London bus standing serenely in the back lot of Wyckham Academy. Several black robed Hogwarts students were unsteadily walking off the bus, with trunks and broomsticks in hand.

"Well. Looks like Hogwarts is here then," muttered Blaise in finality. "Shall we raid the kitchens for some breakfast? I imagine that the Café is going to be a mess."

"But what about announcements?" questioned Harry, turning away from his friend and moving to his dresser to pull out his sweater and belt before moving to the closet.

Blaise shrugged. "Hartz'll find us or send one of the house elves to tell us. Either way, we'll know. Wyckham is small, news carries fast, eh."

While Harry gathered his clothes, Blaise turned on their portable radio and set it to a local alternative rock station. Blaise climbed back on his bed, wordlessly summoning his Transfiguration text to himself, while Harry just shook his head in amusement and left to use the men's toilets.

He took a quick shower, wondering how this years' League would go and if Wyckham would win again. Exiting the shower stall, Harry greeted two upperclassmen who had a single room at the end of the hall politely, and both wished him luck turning the game.

Entering his dorm, Harry tossed his wet towel at a now snoozing Blaise; his friend woke with a loud sputter and "eeww!"

"C'mon, lazy, let's find Floppy and get some breakfast," laughed Harry gaily as Blaise chucked the wet towel back at his friend. Harry chuckled and dropped it in his hamper in his closet, slipping his feet in his school shoes at the same time. Tucked into Blaise's back pocket was a rolled up Quidditch Monthly magazine.

Blaise began chatting as soon as they left their room, commenting on the Knight Bus – as Harry had no idea what it was – and then do

what they might get for breakfast. Both boys were fairly popular with the house elves.

Ignoring the loud chatter from the Café, the boys turned left before the open glass doors and entered the stainless steel kitchen that looked like something out of a child's plastic toy collection. All appliances barely came up to Blaise's hip; they were the perfect size for all house elves working in the kitchen, although there were adult (or normal) sized appliances at the far end of the kitchen.

"How cans Floppy help Masters Blaise and Harry?" squeaked a familiar voice.

Blaise broke into a wide grin and Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked happily back and forth on his heels.

"Floppy, m'boy!" greeted Blaise ecstatically and mimicking the Weasley twins' antics. "How are you this fine Sunday morning?"

Floppy's ears wiggled in excitement and his eyes widened in happiness. "Master Blaise is so kind, so generous, so wonderful! Asking Floppy how he's doing! Floppy is well, Master Blaise, but Floppy is wondering what's Master Blaise liking?"

"Just something like and easy to take around, Floppy," answered Blaise, smiling charmingly at a younger, female house elf. Harry watched in rapt amazement as the female house elf squeaked and blushed a dark green.

Harry took a deep breath to hold in his laughter.

Floppy didn't even move from his place in front of Blaise; four other house elves – Missy, Hully, Frenchy and Chewy – came forward with warmed plates piled with bacon, scrambled eggs, pancakes and two bowls of freshly cut fruit. A flask of orange juice was thrust into Harry's face by Chewy. A knife and fork were also presented, wrapped in a paper napkin. Harry reached out and shoved those in his pocket.

“Thanks, Chewy,” smiled Harry widely, taking the offered flask. Harry grabbed one plate, and precariously placed the bowl of fruit against the eggs, making those topple over the bacon and covering it.

Balancing the load, Blaise and Harry cheerfully thanked the near euphoric elves and left the kitchen with many repeated promises to return soon.

Leaving, the boys decided to eat their breakfast out by their tree near the pond. Reaching their spot, the boys sat and began setting their plates and the flask on the ground – they weren’t worried about ants or bugs, all the plates and utensils were charmed to keep clean and repel bugs. Wyckham was known for their on-the-go students.

When they were nearly finishing their meal, they spotted the Slytherin Quidditch team – sweaty and looking exhausted – come from the far end of the pond, behind the drooping leaves of a weeping willow. Their coach and head of house, Severus Snape, was leading them.

Blaise and Harry fell silent, watching as the team approached. All members were looking tired; Harry guessed it was because their captain or Snape brought them early to Wyckham and then made them do a few laps around the pond.

Blaise silently nudged Harry, taking him away from his musings and jerked his chin at the smallest member of the team, following Snape. It was Draco Malfoy.

The blond recognized the two immediately, as soon as he was close enough to tell who they were, and smiled broadly.

“Blaise, Harry!” he called, drawing the team’s attention to the silent Wyckham students.

“Hallo Draco,” greeted Blaise and Harry together, politely but warily as they eyed the slowing team.

“What’s this?” asked the silky tones of Severus Snape. “Eating outside? Bringing library material out of the school? Tut, tut. How... inappropriate of the most famous boy in our world.”

"I believe that depends on the rules of Wyckham Academy," tightly responded Blaise, thinning his lips while raking a disdainful gaze over the Slytherin Head. "Wyckham is far more lax with their students, as the professors know we are careful with school properly." Blaise then flashed the magazine back and forth. "Beside, the magazine is mine through subscription, so it doesn't matter what I do with it anyway."

Snape's lips thinned in response and he automatically opened his mouth – Harry could almost hear twenty points from Wyckham for disrespecting me, Mr. Zabini! and he valiantly tried to smother a smirk.

Trying to diffuse what could potentially become an all-out Wyckham-Hogwarts brawl and lawsuit, Harry tactically turned to Draco and asked, "You arrived early for the League. Was there any reason for it?"

Draco shrugged. "Something about Dumbledore wanting fewer students at Hogwarts in case of another attack; there was another a few days ago, again."

Harry sighed. "I may not like the man, but it sure hasn't been his decade, has it?"

Draco sniggered. "Apparently not." He brightened. "What broom are you flying? I heard last year you have a Nimbus 2000?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, it flies well enough for me, I suppose, but I've been watching the news and wouldn't mind testing out the Nimbus 2001 or Cleansweep 7. I know the 7 is an older model, but trying out the handling between what was the best before the 2000 and the newest Nimbus would be educational and entertaining at the least."

Draco nodded along, while Blaise slowly turned his head away from Snape, as though leery of not keeping an eye on the man's wand. "My father bought the Slytherin team Nimbus 2001's when I was made Seeker."

Harry's eyes lit up. "So I'll be pit against you, then? I'm looking forward to playing against you, Draco; I haven't had a chance to see you in action yet."

Draco gave an embarrassed laugh that he covered with a sneer. "Yes, well, I've seen you, Potter, and some of those fancy ballet tricks you have won't hold against me!"

"Tough and pretty words, Malfoy," bantered back Harry with a glint in his eye. "What say you, upping the stakes a bit?"

"Oh?" an aristocratic eyebrow rose.

Blaise rolled his eyes in response. Harry, he thought fondly, was sometimes worse than his Yearling Don. Blaise idly wondered if Harry would take up gambling for the thrill of it all.

Harry grinned. "Ten galleons on Aberclythe to win the first game against Hogwarts, but you catch the Snitch; then, on top of the ten, eight more galleons saying Wyckham wins every game we play, with me catching the Snitch in thirty minutes or less."

Some of the Slytherin team members began to murmur amongst themselves behind Draco and Snape scowled darkly.

"Might I remind you, Mr. Malfoy, that gambling is not allowed at Hogwarts?" he all but snarled.

Blaise audibly sighed when Harry spoke up. "He's not at Hogwarts, sir, and Wyckham doesn't have any rules against betting unless it's excessive and dangerous."

"Harry!" hissed Blaise, "Are you mad? Placing bets? You're twelve!"

"And filthy rich," commented Harry blasé, with a dismissively hand wave. "What are eighteen galleons? It is but a raindrop in the ocean compared to my wealth."

Blaise narrowed his eyes contemplatively, falling silent. Draco watched the exchange shrewdly, but nodded slowly, extending his hand.

“Deal!”

The two night-and-day boys shook on it, grinning dangerously at each other. “Until the first game, Draco,” Harry practically chirped, watching happily as the Slytherin team began to crowd around the Malfoy heir, giving him pointers and tips while Snape sulked ahead of them, toward the school.

“What were you thinking!?” Blaise finally burst out, turning to face his friend. “Are you insane? Betting?”

Harry shrugged. “Snape already thinks I’m a spoiled brat who uses his celebrity status, so why not give him a reason to think that? It’ll only hurt him worse later when he realizes that I’m nothing like what he thinks.”

Blaise groaned, but scrambled to his feet when his best friend did, gathering their empty plates. “Now what?”

Harry shot Blaise a look. “Did you want to face Floppy’s wrath if he kept the plates any later? That elf has an internal clock on him that rival’s Donahue’s military regimens!”

Unlike the first Junior Quidditch League, with only a few mainstream newspapers covering the event, the second Junior Quidditch League attracted much more media attention.

Not only were there main newspapers from all over Europe represented, but the British Ministry and all personnel from the Department of Magical Games and Sports were there – from the lowliest clerk to Head Ludo Bagman, who’d be commentating. Several scouts for the British Quidditch teams were also in the stands, omnioculars glued to their faces and clipboards with self-writing quills and pens poised and ready for verbal dictation.

The real treat was International Association of Quidditch chairwizard Hassan Mostafa, and several overseas scouts from the Australian League and members of Q.U.A.B.B.L.E.

The Quidditch stands were enlarged, with the “heads” of the pitch being exclusively roped off for the Ministry, reporters, and VIPs. The stands lengthwise to the pitch were filled with Wyckham students, Hogwarts, Aberclythe and Wyckham professors, and family of the children playing.

Wyckham had decided to take a leaf out of their Muggle counterparts for sporting events, and played music on wired loudspeakers throughout the stands. The speakers were a brainchild of a Wyckham student who had far too much time on their hands, and found a way to tap magic into the speakers with an improved upon Sonorus.

As Bagman introduced the players for each team, they flew a lap around the pitch to different theme songs – Aberclythe had the Rolling Stone’s “Start Me Up” and Hogwarts’ Slytherin’s had 2 Unlimited’s “Get Ready for This”. Wyckham, however, was well known – especially the Pirates’ – and the students immediately following Hogwarts’ announcement began stomping their feet and clapping their hands in a well-known one-two-three pattern. Muggleborns at the other two schools began laughing at the song.

Harry followed his teammates, shooting into the sky quickly. The Weasley twins were having far too much fun hollering at the top of their voices: “We will, we will, rock you!”

Harry passed between the Chasers, giving a thumb’s up and wave, before the Pirates took their position as the starting and host team against Aberclythe. Like Harry promised to Draco, he caught the Snitch in less than thirty minutes against Aberclythe, with Wyckham scoring nearly 240 points within the first twenty minutes.

Harry had gone in a spectacular dive that had cameras flashing and people roaring and standing on their feet. Five feet before hitting the ground, Harry pulled out of the dive, turning ninety degrees and

brushing his right cheek to the blades of grass. As he pulled out of the angle, he stretched his hand out and caught the Snitch.

It had almost been too easy.

Also like Harry predicted, Hogwarts lost to Aberclythe, but Draco did catch the Snitch. When Wyckham played Hogwarts that evening before dinner, Harry found to his annoyance that Draco didn't even play, he merely followed Harry.

Not wanting to seriously hurt the acquaintance, Harry went into a Wronski Feint – a signature move of his he quite liked – and pulled out of it once he saw Draco chicken out. After doing that three times in ten minutes, Harry finally gave pity on the Malfoy heir and let him spot the Snitch that was hovering a mere ten feet below him.

Unfortunately, by the time Malfoy had located the Snitch, Harry was already there, an apologetic expression on his face. However, Draco Malfoy swallowed a bitter taste in his mouth and shook his hand mid-air.

That night, after Aberclythe and Hogwarts students had retired to their temporary rooms, Wyckham partied out by the pond, with the older students drinking and the younger relaxing around a camp fire and listening to the older students tear apart their rival's skills.

A few reporters – those with family connections to students at Wyckham – were invited to stay later and ended up at the makeshift party.

While Harry and his friends were sitting there, Blaise told the others about Harry's idiotic bet.

"You're stupid," was all Dean said, plainly with a wide, toothy smile.

Harry stuck his tongue out at his friend.

“Why?” asked Susan, completely confused.

Harry leaned back against the tree; his eyes were closed. He was listening to the buzz and chirps of crickets and other nighttime insects, and listening to Blaise explain it.

“Essentially, Harry’s walking a fine line,” he began. “His first reasoning for betting with Draco was that Snape already thinks Harry as a spoiled brat and Harry doesn’t want to change his image, as Snape seems the type to hold a grudge and not see what is right in front of him.

“Second, Harry’s walking a fine political line. Draco’s father bought the entire Slytherin team Nimbus 2001’s, and with Harry betting that Draco would catch the Snitch, he’s giving his confidence to the Malfoy heir, showing an alliance. However, by betting that Aberclythe would win regardless, he’s stating that the Slytherin team overall is shit.”

“Blaise! Language!”

Blaise rolled his eyes at Hermione’s snip.

“Harry once stopped Lucius Malfoy and Arthur Weasley from brawling in Flourish and Blotts, and despite not liking the Malfoy patriarch, he’s friendly with Draco, but not Weasley’s son who is our age; Harry’s only friendly with the Twins. So, Harry’s playing both sides.”

“I still don’t get it,” groused Dean.

Neville sighed. “Rumors have it that Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater during You-Know-Who’s first reign of terror. Meaning, with Harry friendly with his son, he’s trying to win over rich, influential members of society that might have ties to You-Know-Who.”

“In case of what?” asked Susan quietly. “Why do that?”

"In case Voldemort comes back," answered Harry sharply, opening his eyes and looking stonily at his friends. "I've already fought him once before. What's not to say I won't again, and again, and again?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed speculatively, and she glanced from Blaise's unsurprised face to Dean, Neville and Susan's slack ones. Ah-ha, she thought triumphantly.

"But..." stuttered Susan, eyes wide.

Harry brushed some grass off his black pants and spoke sharply. "Let's put it this way, guys; if Voldemort returns, and Malfoy runs back into his folds, Draco will obviously overhear things in his own home. If I'm friendly with him, there's a chance he can deter some of the Death Eater's more nefarious plans surrounding me, or get word ahead to me if there is more loyalty to his friend, Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, than his father."

"That's very ill-advised, Harry," commented Hermione softly. "What if he's playing you?"

Harry offered Hermione a tired smile. "Then that's why I have you lot, watching my back."

Harry stood, brushing off grass stuck to his bottom, and Blaise rose quietly; Dean and Neville and Susan stood together, intent on returning to their rooms. Hermione was the last to rise, thoughtfully staring at her best friends.

We might be watching your back, Harry, she thought, suddenly desiring to cuddle Figaro and hear her kitty's reassuring purrs, but who will be there with you at the front?

The next day, Wyckham flattened Aberclythe and Hogwarts, yet again; Harry's prediction continued to ring true as Draco Malfoy caught the snitch against Aberclythe, but the prep school won their game.

During the Aberclythe-Wyckham match, at last one on the second day, Harry spied Albus Dumbledore rise from his seat and leave the Head stand, disappearing instantly. Curious, but not deterred from his game, Harry went into a few loops and corkscrews, and then dove. He pulled out of the dive gracefully, the snitch in his hand, beating furiously.

After taking a shower and changing in the gym locker room, Harry met with his friends and went to dinner. They sat at their usual table, with Luna, Colin, Don and surprisingly Draco, joining them. The table was full.

“Good game,” commented Draco. Harry and Blaise replied in kind, beginning their dinner.

“Where did Dumbledore go?” Harry finally asked, after listening to Hermione and Susan discuss the theory behind a recently learned charm.

Draco shrugged. “He’s tied in to the wards at Hogwarts. If something happened, he’d know from here.”

Harry and Blaise shared a look that Hermione caught; the two then went back to their meals like nothing had happened.

Other than the tensing of their frames, Hermione would not have noticed anything else had she not been watching. Something was off and she was prepared to help when they needed it.

Excusing herself, she went to the library. After all, the place hadn’t failed her yet, and she wasn’t ready to let her two best friends down.

On the final day, Wyckham went first, playing against Hogwarts and then Aberclythe. Despite Aberclythe being a strong team, Wyckham managed to end the game within ten minutes of the starting whistle. Hogwarts didn’t stand a chance when Harry saw the snitch fly right by him five minutes into the game and mid-yawn from Harry. The game just wasn’t challenging anymore.

Hogwarts had the least amount of points, totaling only 590, but managed to come in second place when the Slytherin team used their normal tactics and sent the Bludgers at Aberclythe's Keeper and Seeker respectively. Both were knocked unconscious and the game continued without any reserves.

Hogwarts won that game, 350-160. In the end, Hogwarts finished with 940, Aberclythe with 820, and Wyckham with 1190.

Celebrations took place in the Café, with non-alcoholic drinks and dinner and laughter. The Wyckham team sat together, toasting the other schools for a game well played when Hartz entered the Café with Flamel, looking incredibly pale.

She walked toward the Wyckham table, consciously aware of the noise level dropping.

Stopping next to Harry, who sat next to the Weasley Twins, she said, "I need to speak with the two of you in my office right away."

Confused, the two third years stood and motioned they'd speak with their teammates later. Harry and Blaise left afterward, back to their room and were joined by their friends.

Harry couldn't fight the feeling that something terrible had happened, and a lump was permanently stuck in his throat.

Susan and Hermione settled on Blaise's bed, curling up together and wrapping his comforter around the two of them; Dean and Neville took Harry's bed and a spare pillow from the closet, trying to stay awake with Blaise and Harry. Harry twisted himself to sit in his desk chair, arms wrapped around his knees tightly, and Blaise sat on the floor.

As two in the morning approached, both Dean and Neville were snoring softly.

Blaise, his eyes dark and his figure nearly indistinguishable in the shadowy blackness of the room, turned to Harry and asked, "What do you think happened?"

"The worst: a student was killed. The best: a malfunctioning ward." Harry's answers were clipped and toneless.

Blaise sighed and Harry heard him shift, his bed sheet wrapped around him. "I hope it's a ward."

"Me too," answered Harry sleepily, sighing and shifting slightly. He fell asleep soon afterward.

Harry woke the next morning with Hedwig pecking him lightly with her beak on his cheek. She was clutched and resting against the back of the desk chair, a rolled up newspaper sheet attached to her talon. Harry rubbed his eyes tiredly from underneath his glasses, a bit annoyed at leaving them on overnight, and reached for Hedwig.

Her leg was stretched and Harry murmured a quiet "thank you" when relieving her of the newspaper. He unrolled the sheet and stared, incomprehensible, at the large headline.

Sure he wasn't see it correctly, Harry rose unsteadily from his seat and prodded Blaise, who was still on the floor in a fetal position, with his toe.

"Blaise, wake up!" he snapped finally, when Blaise continued to swat at him.

Dean stirred from Harry's bed and Hermione and Susan were yawning widely. Neville soon followed his friends as Blaise finally woke up and read the newspaper with wide eyes.

"What's going on?" whispered Susan sleepily.

"Newspaper," answered Harry in a clip tone.

“What’s it say? Any news from Hogwarts?” asked Neville, stuttering slightly when his words were broken by a wide yawn. He stretched his arms above his head.

“Yes,” hissed out Blaise in reply.

The friends fell silent and Harry took back the paper. He read the contents out loud.

Terror at Hogwarts: Albus Dumbledore removed from Headmastership!

Last night, a student was kidnapped by whatever creature has been plaguing Hogwarts’ ancient halls since the beginning of the school year. The first attack occurred back in October, and was against the caretaker’s familiar. Since then, there have been more than eight separate attacks on Muggleborn and Half-blood students.

“I’m taking my children out as soon as I can!” cried an angry and frightened parent of a Ravenclaw second year. “Hogwarts isn’t safe anymore!”

The Board of Governors has made several attempts to bring in specialists to scour Hogwarts and find the creature that has been harming the students of the wizard world’s more prominent. Nothing was found.

However, this is not the first time that Hogwarts Professor Dumbledore has come under attack – last year he safeguarded old friend Nicolas Flamel’s Philosopher Stone in an attempt to stop what he considered a spirit-version of You-Know-Who from stealing the Stone from Gringotts Bank, London. Dumbledore placed the students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in dire danger and nearly killed Wyckham student, Harry Potter (12) when he attempted to save a school he did not even attend.

Many frightened parents have already pulled their students out of school and the Hogwarts Express, the train that takes and brings students to the school and London will be arriving at King’s Cross on May 27, at 4pm.

As the students prepare to leave, Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall is taking over the post of Headmistress until further notice.

The student that was kidnapped by the creature was Ginevra Weasley, age 11, of Arthur and Molly Weasley, Ottery St. Catchpole.

The message from the creature was: "Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever."

Harry glanced up at his friends. Hermione had a hand clutched over her mouth in horror, and Neville excused himself, leaving the room quickly. Susan followed, determined to send her Aunt a letter and one to the Weasleys in consolation.

Dean shuffled out of the room silently, pausing long enough to offer a wavy, hesitant smile at Blaise and Harry, before he too, was gone.

Harry knew the Twins were gone from the school, probably already at home with their parents, but that didn't stop him from going to the Quidditch pitch. It was there, only twenty-four hours ago, that he and his friends had won the Junior Quidditch League and he was celebrating with the Twins, not a care in the world.

He was standing in the middle of the pitch, staring up at the sky, and wondering what was going to happen now.

Hogwarts would likely close. The students would either be sent to Aberclythe if they came from prominent Pureblood families and aristocracy, or perhaps Beauxbatons in France and Drumstrang in Germany. Several Muggleborns would be coming to Wyckham, and the student population would grow. Most, however, would probably leave and not return.

It didn't help that Sirius Black was also on the loose, and that he and his friends were no closer in figuring out whether Black was truly innocent and a victim of fate, or guilty.

Harry sighed deeply, ready to turn around and head back inside to his friends, when he heard a voice behind him – slightly familiar – say, “I am sorry about this, Harry,” and everything went black.

AN: Thanks go to Alorkin, who was my 400th reviewer! Oh my, I’ve never had that many reviews and all the good things that people have been saying are making me warm and fuzzy! And over 400 of you are reading my story – at least, that’s what my “story alert” status for ‘Wyckham’ told me!

To Euphemism: Thanks for pointing out the goof in the last chapter. Should you find another, please let me know! And, finally, AchillesMonkey: I appreciate your love for canon – but as you realize, ‘Wyckham’ is an AU. Therefore, students who might have been in Hufflepuff are now in Ravenclaw; Barty Crouch Jr. never ‘died’ two months into his stay in Azkaban; and in this story, Ted Tonks is a Muggle, not a Muggleborn (mainly because I’ve always been under the impression he was a Muggle, although I’m sure I need to reread the last two HP books to catch those, but since I honestly don’t care and his being a Muggle is a part of the story...).

To those who enjoyed Luna’s “Weaselbee” Freudian slip, there will be more. I’ve also noticed that many of you seem to support a Luna/Harry ‘ship. Now, both are fairly young, but I will give you something, although they won’t end up “happily ever after” together, sorry to say – I’ve already made my decision in romantic pairings for the story, but I can be swayed by general opinion and give you scenes for reader loyalty. How else can I reward you brilliant readers?

Things will be slow again once January arrives; school does take precedence over writing (unfortunately) and between new episodes of Lost, House MD, Janice Dickinson’s Modeling Agency and British Invasion: Next Top Model, and my suddenly sprouting social life due to suddenly being single, I will strive to find a balance. I promise. “Wyckham” is my baby. I can’t wait for your thoughts and comments, now that the story is taking off!

Cheers, Kneazle (Dec.24.06)

Chapter Sixteen

Hermione was a bit worried. She had finally figured out what was roaming Hogwarts, and was sure that if she told Harry as soon as possible, he wouldn't go running off to Hogwarts to battle it. After all, this beast was a class-5 in N. Salamander's book *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, and barely anyone who saw this beast came back alive.

Entering Harry and Blaise's bedroom, as she was one of the few who was allowed through the sophisticated wards, Hermione took a look around and settled her eyes on Blaise.

"Where's Harry?" she asked.

Blaise looked up from his desk, where he was writing an essay. "Dunno, last I saw he was going for a walk this morning. You know, after the news?"

Hermione scowled. "I've looked in the library, the gym and weights room, and Café, and he's not there."

"Is it important?"

Hermione's scowl deepened as she realized Blaise hadn't even looked up at her. "Yes," she ground out. "I know what's in the Chamber of Secrets."

Blaise's head jerked up. He stared at Hermione, his eyes wide. "Why haven't you gone to a professor then?"

"I wanted to tell Harry first so he doesn't get a ridiculous idea in his head like going off to Hogwarts to fight the thing instead!"

Blaise adopted a pained look on his face, one that let Hermione know he already had spoken to Harry about that topic. Sighing, Blaise ran his hands through his curly hair and then fixed his blue eyes on Hermione. "All right, let's go find the bugger."

Hermione flashed Blaise and smile and together they left his dorm, with Blaise checking the bathrooms along the way. They checked the Commons, the library again, and by six that evening, were asking everyone they saw if they'd seen Harry.

They all replied with the same answer: "No."

Growing frantic, Hermione and Blaise quickly turned the corner heading to Hartz's office when Hermione bumped into Luna Lovegood.

"Oof!" both girls grunted, landing painfully on their bottoms.

"Watch where you're going, Luna!" snapped Hermione angrily, rising to her feet and rubbing her bruised tailbone.

Luna looked up from the floor, her slightly unfocused eyes traveling from Hermione to Blaise, before they cleared and widened. "You're looking for Harry," she stated calmly.

Hermione breathed heavily through her nose. "Yes, and what's it to you?" she knew she was behaving horribly, but her worry for Harry was overriding her common sense. Blaise touched Hermione's shoulder briefly in warning.

Luna frowned, her faint eyebrows narrowing and meeting. She turned to Blaise and spoke quietly, "You won't find him."

"Why not?" he asked back, fighting his own worry.

Luna sighed. "He's no longer here."

"Where is he?" he continued to ask, his patience growing thin.

Luna shrugged. "I don't know, but he's no longer at Wyckham. Perhaps the Dumb-Door whizzes caught him? They're particularly stubborn and desperate this time of year."

Hermione let out a tiny shriek, ready to lace into Luna when Anita Hartz stepped out of her office, intending on going to dinner in the

Café. She paused when she spotted Hermione standing over Luna, and Blaise crouched beside the blonde.

“What’s going on here?” she asked, her tone strict. She did not approve of bullying in her school.

Blaise sighed, sharing a look with Hermione and then admitted, “Harry’s missing.”

When Harry woke, he was laying face-down on a very cold, rough stone. The ground was cobbled and he was incredibly sore. The air was musty and damp, seeping into his clothing and giving him Goosebumps.

Rising to his knees, Harry rubbed at the back of his head, looking around. He was in a bathroom of sorts, one he’d never seen before, and he and Blaise knew everything about Wyckham.

There were numerous green-painted stalls and a large, circular wash basin to his left. To his right were a row of porcelain sinks and mirrors hanging above them. Floating candles hovered a few feet from the dark ceiling, and instantly, Harry knew where he was.

Sighing, the preteen rose to his feet stiffly, moving to one of the sinks and turning the hot-water tap on. He waited until there was steam rising from the basin, then cupped his hands and ignored the pain of scalding. He splashed his face, allowing the steam to warm him and his hands, hoping to fight the cool dampness of the room.

A giggle made him turn in surprise, his wand already in hand and a few dozen spells on the tip of his tongue.

“Who’s there?” he demanded. “Show yourself!”

Another giggle and then, coming through one of the stalls, was a chubby ghost. She had braids and old-fashioned clothing, and thick bottle-cap glasses. She giggled again and blatantly looked him over.

“Hello,” she began with a grating, high-pitched voice. “Have you come to share my stall?”

Perplexed, Harry frowned. “Um... I dunno. Who are you? And where am I?”

The ghost frowned back, as if unsure. “Don’t you go to school here?”

Harry shook his head. “I attend Wyckham Academy.”

The ghost’s features darkened. They then brightened and she answered his first question. “I’m Myrtle. But the students here at Hogwarts call me Moaning Myrtle.”

“Why do they call you that?” asked Harry, leaning against the basin and calming his beating heart.

“Because I cry a lot,” she replied, floating up and then doing a few lazy circuits around the bathroom.

“I see,” Harry said neutrally. “So I’m at Hogwarts then... did you see how I got here?”

Moaning Myrtle shook her ghostly head. “Sorry, I didn’t. I was off crying in the U-Bend.”

Harry twisted his lips. “That must have been uncomfortable.”

Myrtle sighed. “You’re the first to mention.”

Swallowing, Harry idly wondered how he would get out of this debacle. The last thing he remembered was a familiar voice... oh no, he thought in sudden understanding. He wouldn’t be that desperate...

Turning back to the mirror and clenching his fists against the basin, Harry let his hair fall over his eyes as he stared at the sink. In anger, he felt his magic respond.

Dumbledore wouldn’t do that... he wouldn’t risk his position of Headmaster at this school, and have me come to fight the monster.

He wouldn't, even if the prophecy says I have to kill Voldemort. He wouldn't be daft enough to force me to fight it!

As he was lost in his thoughts, he failed to realize that the smoky steam from running the tap disappeared and instead was now swirling in the glass.

The smoke left an opening, one that revealed not Harry's reflection, but another wizard, who was watching him sadly.

"Harry, my boy," the mirror image said softly.

Harry's head jerked up and he glared at Albus Dumbledore. "Dumbledore, you fucker, what the hell game are you playing here?!"

If Dumbledore were slightly worried, he would've wondered where a twelve-year-old boy could have learned such language, but he was only thinking of the task Harry Potter had to complete.

"Harry," Dumbledore began, "If only you came to Hogwarts. If only you would do your part in the prophecy and fight and help the school."

"Are you daft?" Harry shouted, drawing the attention of Myrtle to him. "You've kidnapped me! Are you so firm in your belief that I am the only one to kill Voldemort that you're forcing me to do your dirty work?"

Dumbledore frowned. "It's not my dirty work, Harry, but you must be prepared for what will happen in the future..."

"And you think forcibly making me will soften me up to you later? Or harden me into the machine needed to kill Voldemort?" Harry scoffed. "When he returns, I will fight him – but on my own terms and how I deem it necessary. I can't believe you would willingly place the students of Hogwarts in danger for a task that I – not even a student at your school – would have to do! I can't believe you'd jeopardize your position as head of the Wizengamot, everything you worked for and your position in society!"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Harry, my boy, nothing will happen!"

"Nothing will happen?" Harry roared back, pushing away from the sink and sneering darkly at the mirror. "Do you realize who I am?"

Dumbledore frowned. "You are Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. I'm sure that nothing will happen Harry, and that your Aunt and Uncle will not take legal actions against me."

Harry stood dumbfounded for several moments, before realization dawned on him and he began to laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

Mirror Dumbledore was frowning, confused as to what had Harry in stitches. "You'll be a hero, Harry! The glorious Boy-Who-Lived yet again, with me at your back as your mentor. It'll be wonderful"—

"You idiot. You bloody idiot," chuckled darkly Harry, in a voice so low Dumbledore had to pause and listen carefully.

Harry rose from his crouched position, stalking closer and closer to the mirror until his nose was nearly touching it. "I left my Aunt and Uncle's after their abuse, when Hartz called social services against them. I don't live anywhere near Surrey, Headmaster. And you honestly think my guardians won't sue you? Or bring this news to the Daily Prophet?"

Dumbledore paled, lost in thought, but anxiously hearing Harry's every word as it drummed itself into his head.

"Did you not realize at my first Gringott's trip, I met with a financial advisor, who told me I inherited the title of Duke? That I am the highest ruling body of the wizarding world, and could overrule the Wizengamot should I please as I am the closest to British royalty? Or that at the Minister's Ball, which you attended this past Christmas, you failed to notice my new friend, His Royal Highness, Erik Munsö of Denmark?"

Harry grinned, slightly demonically, as he whispered the last part, "Oh, Dumbledore, you really blew it this time. And when I get out of here, the shit is going to hit the fan, old man!"

Harry then pulled his right arm back and let it slam forward; he broke the mirror in the bathroom into millions of pieces. Ignoring the pain from the glass shards embedded now in his skin, and the rivers of blood that warmly traveled down his fingers and wrist, Harry tipped his head back and breathed deeply.

He could feel his magic pulsing in time with his heartbeat. Once his heart calmed, he turned to face the ghost that was watching him in awe and some fear.

“Myrtle,” Harry said clearly, his voice demanding attention and no argument. “I want to know how you died.”

The ghost brightened, and she sighed romantically, “You’re the first to ask...” she settled down on a toilet seat and breathlessly began, “Well! Olive was making fun of my glasses again and I was so distraught that I came in here to cry. And while I was in the stall, weeping, I heard someone enter. I yelled at them to go away, but they didn’t listen. Then they spoke, and it was a boy’s voice – and I was wondering what would a boy be doing in here? But he wasn’t even speaking, he was hissing this weird language, and so I opened the stall door to tell him off... and then I died!”

Harry frowned. “Myrtle, the hissing... did it sound like this?” he then concentrated on the image of a snake in his mind, and said to her, “My name isss Harry Potter,” in Parseltongue.

Myrtle shrieked. “Yes! Yes it did!”

Harry’s face darkened as he realized what happened. Dumbledore had yet to figure out the beast, but stuck Harry in Myrtle’s bathroom, the likely entrance and exit to the Chamber of Secrets. Not only that, Harry was now defenseless except his wand, off to fight a Basilisk! Was Dumbledore insane?

Setting his mouth into a thin line, Harry also realized Dumbledore wasn’t going to let him out until the deed was done; when he saved Ginny Weasley. None of his friends knew where he was, and for that, he was greatly annoyed.

Fight a Basilisk? What was he, Superman? Sighing angrily, Harry walked to the far wall of the bathroom, and began to search it from bottom to top and corner to corner for a sign, symbol, anything to signify that the entrance to Salazar Slytherin's chamber was near by.

Finally, nearly an hour later, he found a small snake image on the side of a tap on the circular basin. Staring at it, he whispered, "Open!" and watched in awe as the basin broke with a thump and began to sink into the ground, opening wide enough for a fairly large snake to get through. Swallowing heavily, Harry looked down the hole, but saw and heard nothing.

"Myrtle," he said finally, and quietly.

"Yes, Harry?" she simpered.

"If I don't come back in two hours," he began, looking at her in the eyes, "Go to Flitwick or one of the other professors, not Snape, McGonagall or Dumbledore. Tell them what happened. Everything – including the mirror conversation."

Myrtle nodded, settling to wait for him. "Good luck, Harry!" she waved, as Harry took a deep breath and jumped into the hole.

The ride down was scary and intense; he slipped sideways and gathered muck and dirt along his back and in his hair, the air becoming more putrid as he went further down.

Harry was shot out from the slide, falling several feet and landing painfully on his hands and knees, hissing a swear word in Parseltongue as he felt something pierce his hand's skin. Looking down, he felt nearly nauseous, staring at the bones and carcasses of small mammals.

Choking, he rose swiftly to his feet, reciting everything he knew of Basilisks in his head, over and over. Maybe he'd get lucky. Maybe he'd send Dumbledore down here and see how he'd like it, that ass.

Climbing over some rocks, Harry carefully and slowly maneuvered his way through a gap and was soon following a cleared trail. He passed the shed skin of the snake, nearly fainting at the large sight of it, nearly a hundred feet long. This thing was thousands of years old, and most likely the baby Slytherin nursed in his time.

Harry came upon a large, circular iron door, with two snakes intertwined. They were hissing at him, saying rude remarks until he finally lost his patience and snapped back, "Open up, you disgusting reptiles, thinking to keep the likes of me from your grand halls!"

The snakes, surprised, unwound from each other and the door unlocked with a click. Harry entered the Chamber of Secrets slowly, and warily.

He slipped his wand out, and murmured a heat-seeking charm. In the distance, he spotted a blue, barely yellow spot while a red one hovered near by. Apparently Ginny Weasley was not having a lucky day. His gaze swept over the Chamber, and through the cool rock spotted a denser part, behind a large slab of something.

Ending the charm, Harry saw the large slab was really a large stone carving of Slytherin's face. Harry knew where the snake was now.

He moved slowly and carefully, one foot crossing in front of the other as he moved sideways to the girl, his back against the wall and his eyes constantly moving for threats.

Soon, the wall ended and he was in the middle of the Chamber, a few meters from Ginny Weasley. She looked the same as she had that day in Flourish and Blott's.

Sighing, his eyes darted toward the other figure hovering in the shadows, and moved to the girl, never taking his eyes off the dark figure.

Harry knelt, fumbling for her hand, and then when he had it, checked her pulse. It was weak, but there. She wasn't dead yet.

"She's not dead," the figure spoke with a polished accent.

Harry grinned darkly. "Thanks, but I can tell for myself."

The figure stepped into the light, frowning. It was a tall teenaged boy, looking eerily familiar to Harry with jet-black hair, dark eyes and a lean body. He wore a Slytherin badge and sweater, in a style not similar to those that Draco Malfoy wore.

"And you are?" the teen sneered at Harry, looking his blue and black colours over.

"None of your business," Harry snapped back, annoyed. Had Dumbledore sent this idiot down here as well?

The teen sneered and Harry paused. There was something familiar in that facial expression. "Then why are you down here to save the Weasley?" the teen all but snarled. "Want some glory to yourself?"

Harry let out a dry laugh. "With a Basilisk down here? No, thank you. Who are you? Did Dumbledore leave you down here?"

The teen frowned. "Dumbledore? That worthless old man? He couldn't leave me down here if he tried! I control these rooms, as the heir of Slytherin."

Ahhh, thought Harry. "I see. Your name, heir?"

The teen frowned thoughtfully. "Tom Riddle. And you?"

"Back to that are we?" Harry shrugged. "Harry Potter."

"Potter!" the teen hissed and backed away. He then stalked close and sneered, "How is it that you, an unremarkable boy, could stop the greatest Dark Lord in history?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Ooh, I see it now. Tom Riddle. Dark Lord... you're Voldemort before he was Voldemort, aren't you? Your sneers are familiar."

Riddle was momentarily taken aback, but then composed himself. "Well then, boy? What made you so special?"

Harry laughed. "The hell if I know!" he rose to his feet, ignoring Ginny Weasley's cooling body. "If I knew, Riddle, I'd be after you like a bee to honey. Now, I can only imagine you want to kill me, hmm? Then do it. Call your Basilisk and let's play."

Riddle seemed shaken, but did as Harry wanted. He turned his back on the boy, stretching his arms out and opened his mouth, ready to call the snake to his bidding. However, he was not prepared for Harry's attack.

Harry charged the teenaged Voldemort, wrapping his arms around his torso and bulleting the two into the murky water around the Chamber. Completely unprepared for the attack, Riddle went down easily, and stayed down as Harry held the boy's head under the foot-deep water, catching a flailing arm easily.

Harry risked a glance back at Ginny Weasley and saw her colour was returning the longer Riddle was under. However, that risk allowed Riddle to cuff Harry's head and knock the preteen back, landing painfully on his side, half-in and half-out the water.

The teen sat up, breathing deeply and taking deep gulps of air, hissing in Parseltongue.

Harry swore, kicking his leg out and catching the side of Riddle's head, knocking the older boy down into the water, onto his side.

Harry jumped up, his wand out and his open ready to attack. "Reducto!" he shouted, aiming for Riddle's torso. The teen yelped in surprise and barely jumped out of the way in the water, scrambling backwards. The water where he was just at foamed and shot up like a geyser.

The two were silent, ignoring the opening of Slytherin's mouth and the loud thump of the basilisk hitting the floor. Riddle was staring at Harry in surprise and slight horror.

“You’re only twelve,” he whispered.

“And I’m ready to survive,” shot back Harry.

With a nod, Riddle turned to the Basilisk and ordered, “Kill him!”

Harry swore darkly and ducked behind a snake pillar. He heard the snake move toward him, quickly and dangerously, and Harry rolled his head on his shoulder, cracking his neck.

Ready. If the prophecy is true... let’s do this!

Harry jumped out from behind the pillar, shouting and constantly moving, hoping his aim was true: “Reducto! Diffindo! Diffindo! Reducto! Bombarda!”

He ducked behind another pillar, spotting a smirking Riddle watching him, and felt hatred well up in his body. He heard the snake hiss in pain, glad that his aim was fairly good, and then knew what to do.

He raced back toward Riddle, watching as the teen’s eyes widened, and glanced at his snake in worry. Harry tackled him again, losing his wand in the process.

The two went flying hard against the stone ground, Harry overshooting and flipping over and landing painfully on his back a few feet away from the groaning teen.

The snake paused, unsure of its attack.

That was when Harry heard it; a trilling noise that warmed his heart and had Riddle moaning in fear.

Opening his eyes, he saw a red comet streak by him, gold sparks trailing the comet and landing on his body, warming him. Rolling to his side, he saw Dumbledore’s phoenix, Fawkes, resting on top of a snake statue, cooing at him.

Fawkes was clutching the Sorting Hat, the means to sort Hogwarts students, in one talon.

“A phoenix?” questioned Riddle warily, on his knees and holding his arm.

Harry rose, ignoring the snake, and Fawkes flew to him; the hat was dropped in front of him, and Harry put it on, while Fawkes went to the snake –

“Ah, Mr. Potter!” the voice came from inside his head. “Such bravery! Gryffindor would’ve suited you nicely!”

“Cute, but I’m in a life-or-death situation here, do you mind?” snapped back Harry, trying to form his Occlumency shields.

He felt the hat smile. “Of course. I have something that will help you, My Lord!”

Harry quickly took the hat off, and reached inside, after groping, his fingers hit cold metal and they wrapped around a cool, cylinder-shape.

Yanking, Harry pulled out a heavy broadsword, adorned with jewels, and engraved on the blade: Godric Gryffindor.

Swishing it down, Harry turned to face the snake, only to be pleasantly surprised that Fawkes had poked both the snake’s eyes out, making it safe for Harry to look at his target.

Riddle was shouting at the phoenix, and hissing at his snake, trying to guide it to the bird and snapping its massive jaws empty on air.

Racing past Riddle, Harry let out a savage battle cry, using all his body weight to carry himself forward at the snake in what he would clearly remember later as a suicide attempt.

The snake paused, and Riddle stopped with his orders; Fawkes let out a worried squawk, but Harry ignored them all – the sword hit the smooth nose and top of the snake, and Harry dug it in slightly, using the leverage to vault further like he was on a spring board for gym class.

He pulled the sword out as he landed further on top of the snake, quickly digging the sword deep into the snake's brain. The snake hissed loudly and opened its jaw wide, saliva and venom escaping and landing on the stone floor, but Harry held on.

Accio wand! He thought hard, keeping one hand wrapped tightly around the jeweled hilt.

Riddle swore and jumped when Harry's wand went whizzing past his head, more than a little startled at the savageness and single-minded determination Harry Potter had.

With the wand in his other hand, and sword in his right, Harry muttered with the wand tip pointed near where the sword was embedded, "Reducto! Diffindo!"

The two spells combined caused the top of the snake's head to be blown apart, revealing the brain mass beneath it. The cutting spell caused unfixable damage and the snake shuddered as it fell to the floor heavily.

Harry, breathing heavily, turned on Tom Riddle who, for someone proclaiming to be the greatest Dark Lord in history, or who would be, cringed. Harry stalked to the teen, the sword dragging along the stone floor and making a grating noise.

Riddle took a step back, faltering, and then forward again, a sneer on his face. "You don't scare me, boy!"

"You should be," replied Harry quietly. "How else could a year-old baby defeat the greatest Dark Lord in history, anyway, if he didn't have some amazing power? Imagine what he could do to a seventeen-year-old version."

Riddle visibly swallowed, and Fawkes trilled above the two.

"How about you make it easy for me and tell me how to save the Weasley?" Harry offered instead, smirking as he changed his path directions to the girl.

Riddle let out a strange sort of gurgle, but regained confidence the further Harry was from him.

“She won’t wake, you know!” he called at Harry. “She’s alive, but only just!”

“I wonder why,” answered Harry sarcastically, glaring at the teen. “Obviously, if Voldemort exists currently, and you’re the younger version of him from some time ago... you can’t be real. You’re already from a time past.” His voice took on an academic and nostalgic edge, as he turned his back on the teen and looked over Ginny Weasley’s body.

He knelt, touching her ice-cold skin. She won’t last much longer, he thought worriedly, but then looked at what she had with her.

Her book bag was still looped around her shoulders, with her books spilling out and a broken ink well staining the bag and ground near it, except, by one book that ought to be soaked in it. The ink around that book was a perfect circle of no ink – the book could’ve been in a shielding dome.

Harry reached for it, and picked the light, thin leather-covered book up, hefting and testing its weight.

“No—!” began Riddle, but stopped immediately. It was too late, though; Harry knew what it was meant as.

Sending Riddle a wicked smirk, Harry placed the book back on the floor, and rose. “You’ll learn in time, Riddle. And I look forward to fighting you at your peak.” With that said, Harry raised the broadsword above his head, holding on the hilt with both hands wrapped tightly around it.

Ignoring Tom Riddle’s scream, Harry plunged the sword down and pierced through the leather book, hitting the stone floor and probably chipping the sword. Ink spurted out from it, drenching Harry’s lower half.

Riddle and Harry stared at each other for a few moments; nothing happened. Riddle smirked, thinking he was in the safe. He began walking toward Harry and Ginny, when a beam of light shot out from his chest.

Riddle stopped, and Harry raised the sword again, and plunged it down a second time. More light shot out from tiny holes in Riddle's torso, and more ink splattered on his body.

The third time Harry pressed the sword of Gryffindor into the tiny book, Riddle's entire body was broken into tiny holes of light until he finally burst, sparkles falling silently to the floor.

Beside his foot, Ginny Weasley took a deep, gasping breath of air and rolled her head to her side.

Harry smiled gently, ignoring the snake's blood, his own, and the ink from the book. Kneeling, he turned the girls' head away from him, and said, "Calmly. Take deep, long breaths."

The girl obliged, and slowly, her cheeks returned to their rosy colour and her body warmed up. Harry helped her sit up and kept a hand on her back to hold her steady.

"All right there?" he asked, looking at her eyes.

She opened her mouth, blushed when she realized who he was, and nodded, letting her hair fall in front of her face.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Harry asked, and then held up the book in front of her, "Or how this worked?"

Ginny gave a shudder and sob when she saw the book, and Harry lowered it, pulling the girl to him. "Shh, it's okay, you don't have to tell me. How about we get you home, hmm? To your mum, with a nice cuppa and tons of warm blankets and your favourite bedtime story, eh?"

The girl clutching his sweater gave a few dry sobs, nodding into his shoulder. Looking at Fawkes, Harry nodded once to the bird, who flew down to the pair, the Sorting Hat still clutched in his other talon.

Harry used his right hand to hold tightly onto the sword, but before Fawkes reached the duo, stuffed the book down his back trousers.

Fawkes grabbed on to the back of Harry's sweater with one talon and then they disappeared from the Chamber of Secrets in a burst of scarlet flames.

When they reappeared, they were in an unfamiliar place. The room was messy, with a sagging, old couch and several quilts placed on the ends, with many, many pillows.

A clock on the wall had more than three hands – each hand here had a name and instead of numbers, there were words like “home,” “traveling,” “mortal peril,” and “death.” The hand that read ‘Ginny’ in cursive script traveled slowly from ‘mortal peril’ to ‘home’ and then chimed.

There was a crash from somewhere else in the house, and coming through an arched entryway was a large, red-haired woman with an apron and red-rimmed eyes.

She stopped at the sight of them, and did not move until Ginny raised her head from Harry's side and gasped, “Mum!”

The girl removed her hands from Harry's side and stumbled to her mother, who caught her in a crying, crushing grip. Their combined sobs merged.

Thundering steps raced down the stairs, and Harry saw Arthur Weasley enter the room, two other redheads and the Twins behind him. Arthur took one look at Harry, bloodied and disheveled, and then his daughter and closed his eyes tightly. When he opened them, they were watery with unshed tears.

The man turned to Harry and stepped forward, his hand extended. "You saved the Weasley name once before against Lucius Malfoy, my Lord, and now you've saved my daughter. I don't know how the Weasley family could ever repay you."

Harry shook the man's hand and frowned. "I don't want anything from you, Mr. Weasley, and I wouldn't dream of demanding anything, either. Your daughter would've died, and while a brawl with Malfoy could've ended your career, I doubt the Weasley perseverance would not allow you to find another job."

Arthur gave a half-laugh, half-choked sob and clasped the young Potter's hands tightly. "If there is anything I have to give, it's your, my Lord. I mean it. You've done more for this family than I could ever dream of."

Harry sighed. "If that's the case..."

Immediately, all eyes were on him, and he motioned for the three males to sit, while Mrs. Weasley took Ginny away from the room.

Anxiously, the five Weasleys wondered what Harry would ask from them. Harry sat in an armchair, and looked curiously at the two redheads he didn't know, while the Twins lounged against the family room wall.

"My oldest sons, Bill, and Charlie," Arthur introduced, "And boys, this is Lord Harry Potter, the Duke of Ashbourne."

The two men nodded and murmured their greeting, and Harry smiled grimly. "I don't want anything physical, Mr. Weasley—"

"Arthur!"

"Arthur," agreed Harry swiftly. "I want to know what you think of Albus Dumbledore."

The Weasley patriarch frowned, sharing a look with his sons and noticed the Twins' scowls, and then turned to Harry. He opened his mouth and told Harry exactly what he thought of Dumbledore,

something he had kept secret inside him since Hogwarts experienced the Chamber and his daughter's disappearance.

Harry returned to Wyckham Academy past midnight with Arthur Weasley through the Floo. Oliver Wood spotted the two first, yelling down the hall, "It's Harry! He's back!"

Arthur was supporting the young noble, an arm around his waist to hold him up while Harry fought his exhaustion.

Anita Hartz, Nicolas Flamel, William Blake, Blaise Zabini and his Healer, Mabel McMillan, raced around the corner, skidding to a halt near the two.

Healer McMillan stepped to Harry's free side and began checking the boy's vitals, before looking up and saying, "He's spending the night in the hospital." She began steering him to the large room next to the communications center, where he and Arthur arrived.

"Thank Merlin it's so close," murmured Arthur, "At Hogwarts', it's ages away!"

Soon, Harry was placed in a bed and Healer McMillan and Yamen were working on him. Flamel and Hartz stood nearby, speaking to Arthur Weasley who apparently knew what had happened.

Their faces were growing darker and darker with every word uttered, yet Harry didn't hear or know this; he was staring at the ceiling, with Blaise clutching his hand tightly on the Healer's other side.

"You're one lucky sonovabitch, you know that, Harry?" whispered Blaise, as McMillan left to get a Dreamless Sleep draft. "You fight a Basilisk and survive! You saved the day again, my friend."

Blaise would've said more, but McMillan had returned with the draft and Harry gratefully swallowed it, and then fell blissfully into a dreamless sleep.

A week later, Harry was let out of the hospital room, completely healed and without any scars from the battle. Hartz and Flamel had already spoken to him about what occurred and what he could remember, and Heather and Robert Woolworth had stopped by, asking if Harry wanted to press charges against Dumbledore or leave it.

Harry still hadn't decided.

By now, it was mid-May and summer had bloomed in southern England. Anyone outside could faintly smell salt, coming from the sea, and many students were seen studying outside or enjoying pick-me-up games of Quidditch or rougher sports like rugby.

Harry was suppose to take it easy, enjoying a rare lie-in when he was rudely awakened by Blaise shaking his shoulder roughly.

"C'mon, wake up!" the boy whispered.

"Whaaaaa?" groaned Harry, pushing the covers off and staring at his friend. He rubbed his eyes, nervously looking at the fuzzy Blaise until his best friend handed him his glasses.

"You need contacts, mate," Blaise said seriously, before flashing his friend a smile. "C'mon, we're going off campus!"

"What?" Harry was fully awake now. "We can't, only upper years are allowed!"

"Live a little, you nearly died due to Dumbledore's meddling, and I want you to have some fun before he tries something stupid again."

Harry sighed and pushed his covers away completely, reaching for his discarded trousers from the day before.

Blaise rolled his eyes, "Oh, don't be daft, go take a shower and change... we'll leave soon enough!"

Harry complied, and two hours later, the two boys found themselves in Brighton, standing at the famous cliffs, watching in awe as several other people strapped themselves into hang gliders and pushed off from the cliff edge.

“You two are going hang gliding?” one instructor asked skeptically. The boys nodded, showing a forged permission form from their parents. Sighing, the instructor nodded and strapped the two up, going tandem with an instructor each; neither was allowed solo flights.

“On three,” the instructor said into Harry’s ear, doing final checks. Harry gave the instructor a thumbs up. “One... two... three!”

The two ran to the edge and pushed off, and Harry felt his stomach freefall along with their body, sure they were plunge into the water below them. But then a draft caught the wings of the glider, and they moved up, with the draft; the instructor turned his body, and Harry followed as though he was on his broom.

A wide grin spread across Harry’s face, and he forgot about Wyckham, about Dumbledore, and his brush with death, he forgot about everything.

“WOOOO!” Blaise crowed from below them, waving his arms about. “I’M LIKE A BIRD!!”

Harry laughed, freely, and smiled widely.

He soared.

AN: I got carried away, I’m afraid. I’ve been listening to the Escaflowne OSTs since 7, when I began writing this chapter, and it’s now 10.30 – but I did have a few interruptions, like talking to my ex. The ending is rather romantic, terribly sorry about that – but otherwise, action, adventure, and Dumbledore finally knows what he’s up against. I think.

Congrats to those of you who caught Dumbledore – as to why it's only a "familiar" voice, not one that Harry recognizes, he goes out of his way to avoid the man and has only spoken with him about four times in two years. Sirius will show soon, fear not!

And did anyone catch Luna's slip again? And what do you think Harry and Arthur Weasley spoke about?

Happy New Years, everyone! Party safe, have fun, and see you in 2007!! – Kneazle (Dec.30.06)

PS: As usual, any mistakes, point them out! They'll be changed and noted accordingly!

PPS: Thanks to those who've pointed out mistakes!

Chapter Seventeen

Quiet descended on Wyckham as exams loomed closer and closer, and Harry had to make a decision regarding Dumbledore soon.

On one hand, he despised being pulled into the wizard world's politics and forced to play the hero – but on the other hand, if he didn't, who would when Voldemort finally won? Half the time when he was at school he felt decidedly Peter Parker-ish, feeling the need to use his magic to save idiotic sheep.

However, he didn't have the luxury of making a decision. Harry Potter was only twelve years old. Sure, he stopped Voldemort three times now. Once, he couldn't remember; second time because he was an idiot and thought saving Hogwarts might earn him brownie points with Dumbledore so the man would leave him alone; and third, just recently in the Chamber of Secrets against his will.

He wasn't stupid though. Harry knew that as long as Dumbledore was in control of Hogwarts, the school would be... marginally... safer than any other location in the world except maybe the Vatican or Pentagon. Voldemort was afraid of Dumbledore. Dumbledore ran a school of children. Ergo, the children would be safe.

At least, in principle, that worked.

Dumbledore was a man – a slightly demented one, in Harry's humble opinion, but still a man that made mistakes. And as Blaise would say, Albus Dumbledore made "a great many bloody mistakes" when it came to Harry Potter, thus making fairly Harry uncharitable to the Supreme Mugwump at the moment.

But Harry also didn't want the man in Azkaban, or taken from society. When he wasn't blatantly manipulating people, he wasn't too bad of a guy.

Harry sighed. Who was he kidding? Dumbledore wouldn't stop bothering Harry, not after that mirror conversation. He firmly believed in whatever the exact wording was of the prophecy, which Harry was somehow tied to.

In Harry's mind, Dumbledore was merely a zealot, firm in his belief that Harry, and Harry alone, would be the one to stop Voldemort. However, before the prophecy was known to Dumbledore, why wasn't Voldemort stopped? They must have had at least five years between his rise to power and when the prophecy was made. It seemed that the wizard world was content to idly sit by, let their world be destroyed, and then nitpick on their savior.

Harry wasn't buying into it. Sure, he had money, he had influence, and he had some really high-up friends. But he also didn't have to do anything. What could he really do? Wave his wand and chant 'abracadabra' over and over, hoping it sounds close enough to 'avada kedavra' that it would scare any Death Eaters or Voldemort silly? It was cute, but ineffective.

So, unless Harry could stop time, train for sixty years until he was about Voldemort's natural age, partake in some dark rituals and perhaps tap into a deep well of unmentionable powers, Harry was just a normal kid who happened to stop Voldemort when he was a baby.

And it was most likely because of his mother. Harry highly doubted it was because he burped on Voldemort or shat in his diaper that caused the Dark Lord to go all vaporized spirit on him.

And beyond clearly understanding difficult and powerful spells, Harry continued to have trouble with easier ones like wingardium leviosa – not like any of his friends knew, of course. Except Blaise, but he was sworn to secrecy and couldn't say anything otherwise. Harry would spend countless hours in the library or the Commons after everyone was asleep practicing the same spells over and over, hoping to get that feather a little higher, to get his pronunciation a bit more crisp.

But hey – when it was all in your head, you sound brilliant and sophisticated and you don't need to worry about wand movements or pronunciation. Of course, the extra lessons with Kingsley Shacklebolt helped too.

But it still didn't help him with his decision over Dumbledore. The man kidnapped him, stunned him, forced him into a life-or-death situation, and here Harry was, whining about it and unsure of his decision!

What am I, a pussy? Harry sourly wondered. He knew the correct course of action was to tell Dumbledore off, and strip him of his titles and position in the wizard world by bringing all his ill deeds to the Daily Prophet.

The unfortunate thing was that Harry knew the wizard world would need Dumbledore in the coming years when Voldemort returned – and return he will. Harry knew that now with certainty, after seeing the lengths the man went through to get the Philosopher's Stone (though it was a fake, how stupid can you get – but Harry quickly ended that thought because he was stupid enough to go after it as well) and the Chamber of Secrets' diary. Harry foiled his plans twice and would soon have to deal with the constant threat of Voldemort. Having Dumbledore on his side would be a plus.

Harry sighed. He was still at an impasse. He had to find a balance between humiliating Dumbledore, throwing his own weight around in the wizard world to show Dumbledore where Harry Potter stood, and keeping Dumbledore in a position where he could still protect Hogwarts or the wizard world. It would be a difficult decision in the end, and his friends and family would either be incredibly proud of him, or disappointed.

Nodding his head, Harry rose from his stiff position of sitting by the pond for uncountable hours, and headed back for Wyckham. He knew what he was going to do.

To: Mr. Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

From: the offices of Davis & MacDougal

Dear Sir,

Your presence is kindly requested on May 29, 1993 by 2:00pm, at the Offices of Davis and MacDougal, solicitors, located at 45 Diagon

Alley. You are being sued by our client Lord Harry Potter on the following charges:

attempted murder

harassment

stalking

invasion of privacy

withholding personal information

abuse of power in regard to the Potter will

and reckless endangerment

You may bring your own solicitor to the hearing, and be aware that these charges are up for negotiation by our client. If his terms are not met, the substantial amount of proof we have collected of your misdeeds will be printed in a special edition of the Daily Prophet and you will be stripped of your titles and power. Our client knows that there will be turbulent times ahead and does not wish this to happen.

Consider yourself lucky.

Sincerely,

Joseph Davis & Duncan MacDougal

Harry arrived early with Robert Woolworth and Archibald Wallace at 45 Diagon Alley. Archie had contacted his family's old solicitors for the job as they had never let a Potter down before. Harry was hoping to continue that tradition.

If not... well, he didn't want to think about that.

Robert had insisted that Harry wear his best suit; it was all black, with subtle dark, dark green pinstripes and he wore a green button up underneath with black tie. Blaise had watched him dress that morning before leaving Wyckham, and commented wryly that Harry looked like a Slytherin. It wouldn't endear him to Dumbledore.

"I'm not trying to win him over," the preteen argued back. "That time is over."

Harry, Robert and Archibald arrived early, before Dumbledore had arrived, and were nervously sitting in the comfy conference room chairs. Joseph and Duncan had directed Harry and his company into a spacious, Spartan conference room, with a black table and black wingback chairs spaced around the oval table.

"Are you ready, Mr. Potter?" asked Duncan MacDougal as he and his partner strode into the conference room. Both were tall, dark haired men, wearing dark wizard's robes that looked more like 19th century opera cloaks.

Harry swallowed thickly, half-slumping in his seat and rubbed his temple with his right hand. "I made my decision, Mr. MacDougal. I won't back away now."

He then straightened and folded his hands tightly above the table. Robert chose the seat next to him, on his right side, and silently offered his support. Archibald took Harry's left and placed a thick folder in front of him. In it were copies of Dumbledore's numerous misdeeds since Harry's birth.

Albus Dumbledore walked into the conference room right as the clock above the door chimed two; he came alone, without a solicitor to represent him. Harry wasn't sure what to make of this, but he outwardly did not show any facial expression.

The elderly wizard looked older than usual, his wrinkles deeply set, his eyes troubled, and his body slightly stooped. He took his seat across from Harry, Robert and Wallace, nodding to each of them in greeting.

Joseph and Duncan shared a look but Duncan cleared his throat and said, "Let's start this."

All heads swiveled in his direction, and Duncan continued, "Mr. Dumbledore, do you have the letter we sent you?"

"Yes," he replied, in a sigh.

"Do we need to reread the list of accusations against you again?"

"No," the old wizard argued.

Duncan nodded. "Very well. We can begin this immediately then. We'll open the floor up. Mr. Dumbledore, would you like to begin?"

Albus Dumbledore looked his full age. He was clearly tired, and Harry did feel a slight twinge of pity for him; but that emotion was gone just as quickly when he remembered the Basilisk.

"All I can say in my defense is that I believe I was doing the right thing, the right thing in helping Harry"—the Headmaster of Hogwarts paused and winced as he saw the glares sent his way. —"Mr. Potter in fulfilling his destiny."

"If that was the case, Mr. Dumbledore, why didn't you arrive at his Aunt and Uncle's house personally, if you'd taken it upon yourself to be in charge of his life?" Joseph asked.

Dumbledore frowned. "It did not occur to me."

"Or offer special training under your tutelage?"

"I was hoping to give him a normal childhood."

"And yet prepare him for his destiny at the same time? That is a walking contradiction, sir."

"I realize now that it is. I hadn't intended in it being that way... I wanted Mr. Potter to grow up happy, but unspoiled; I wanted him to enjoy his childhood before Voldemort would return or try something."

Dumbledore laced his fingers together and set them on top of the table. "I'm afraid that I failed in that regard."

"Why did you place Harry in life threatening situations, including resorting to kidnapping?"

And so forth; the questions continued on and on, covering Harry's deeds at Hogwarts, their previous conversations (including where Dumbledore insulted Blaise, Harry was so thankful for his friends handy dictation spell), and then moving onto financial matters. Names of people Dumbledore had bribed to keep silent on tiny changes – nothing too major that people would question – were brought up into the discussion. Finally, the question period came to an end.

"Lastly," said Duncan, rubbing his temples, "Do you know the entire contents of the prophecy that Harry is in?"

The man's jacket and tie were off, his top buttons undone as numerous papers were scatted at the head of the table, more notes and chicken scratch writing flowing into the margins as the two lawyers wrote down everything Dumbledore said.

"Yes," whispered a pained Dumbledore.

"Divulge the contents, please," stated a weary Joseph.

"I cannot," Dumbledore argued, his voice rising. It was the only time he had refused cooperation. Robert and Wallace shared a look above Harry's head, while Harry stared hard at the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"Why not?" he asked, asking the question his lawyers were about to.

Dumbledore turned slowly to face Harry, his colour a little pale as he did so. "Your mind—"

"I know Occlumency. I know that I have to kill Voldemort or else die," interrupted Harry shortly. "So, I think since it's about me, you tell me what it is."

Dumbledore frowned, sighing, and spoke quietly: “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.”

The conference room was silent.

“Well,” Harry finally said, breaking the terse quiet. “That sucks.”

The people in the room adjourned for coffee and cake; Duncan and Joseph were whispering quietly in one corner of the conference room, going over the papers they collected and evidence. Robert and Harry sat together in their seats at the table, while Wallace and Dumbledore spoke – they had gone to school together and knew Harry’s great-grandfather.

Robert was sipping his coffee when Harry asked, “Do you think he’ll contest anything?”

The older man sighed. “I don’t know. He’s been incredibly cooperative, so there’s the chance that he knows that he’s lost, so to speak. However, if he pulls the ‘for the greater good’ bollocks, then you know he’ll contest some of our terms of agreements.”

Harry hummed thoughtfully; he was content to brood, but Robert interrupted him.

“I don’t think I had the chance to say in the past few weeks, Harry, but Heather and I are very proud of you and how you’re handling this. I’m very sure your parents would be thinking the same thing.”

Harry smiled gently at his guardian and thanked him, not a moment too soon, as Duncan announced, “All right, break’s over. Let’s finish this.”

Joseph shuffled his papers and looked over the top of them to Dumbledore. The man's beard disappeared under the table top and looked stringier than normal, making Joseph sure that this case was taking something from the wizard. He did feel some pity; this was once the same man who saved Britain just fifty years earlier, full of power and vigor... and now, he was a frail old man, beaten down by just believing in a prophecy.

"Are we all ready?" Joseph finally announced.

All the parties in the room nodded their heads, or said their agreement. Duncan turned to Dumbledore.

"Mr. Potter has decided that the two of you come up with a suitable punishment. However, if he contests an idea of yours, you must hash it out until both parties are happy... and ultimately, Mr. Potter must be the happiest party. Is this acceptable?"

Albus Dumbledore nodded. It was better than he had hoped for.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then decided it was best for Harry to begin, so he had a better understanding of what the young Duke wanted.

"I would prefer if you remain as the Head of something," began Harry slowly, his words heavy with thought. "I'm unsure if I prefer you Headmaster of Hogwarts or as Supreme Mugwump. This is because I know Voldemort will be returning... sometime in the near future... and you need to be in a position of power to make a stand against him."

"I agree," said Dumbledore, surprised a twelve-year-old had figured out that Voldemort wasn't truly gone.

"Did you have a preference? Because, honestly, I'm uncomfortable with you in either position, Dumbledore. As a Headmaster, you endangered your students to see if I was able to fulfill a prophecy. But as the Mugwump, you misplaced your power and ruined my life for a period of time. I was abused and neglected and it sucked," finished

Harry with a cool voice. "So I suggest you think clearly which might serve you best."

Dumbledore understood, in a way, where Harry was coming from. However, Dumbledore also thought that everything he was doing was for the greater good, and that Harry's role to play was an important one. Dumbledore had to think which might have more control over. In the end, the choice was simple.

"I shall let Minerva know that she will be the Headmistress of Hogwarts come the new term," he began slowly. He looked shrewdly at Harry, "is this acceptable?"

Harry frowned. It was already late May, though... Hogwarts barely had a month and some left. "Accepted."

Joseph made a scribble on his parchment and nodded: one detail down, more to go.

However, having Dumbledore out of Hogwarts was important; though Harry wasn't stupid either, the man wanted control over laws that could benefit him and restrict Harry.

"I would like a restraining order as well," said Harry, breathing in deeply. "You kept interfering with my life and I would like that to stop; this includes any agents of yours under your orders – direct or indirect, manipulated or not."

Inwardly Dumbledore cringed; that would severely limit him to laws only. He did not want that at all – and he wanted to use an old friend of Harry's to sway him back into power so he could train the boy. He shook his head. "That, I am afraid, I will not accept. I am the Head of the Order of the Phoenix, and I would have a guard around you incase Death Eaters attempted something against you or your family." He looked over Robert's distinctly Muggle clothing and felt an eyebrow lift. "They are Muggles, my boy, how would you protect them?"

Harry felt a stirring of anger in his belly. Without a thought, he whipped out his wand and smartly said, pointing it at Dumbledore's water glass, "wingardium leviosa!"

The glass rose swiftly and steadily; Robert watched in awe and pride; Joseph and Duncan were a little annoyed but content; and Dumbledore was in shock. He glanced around and asked, "Is this room masked for underage spells?"

"You won't find the Ministry sending me a letter," replied Harry smugly, ignoring the warning bells going off in his subconscious.

Dumbledore nearly scowled; the boy could train at home and then where would he be? Harry needed special training that only he could provide, like Voldemort's history that he had been collecting during his summer vacations.

"But the Order?" pressed Dumbledore, getting back on track.

"I will meet with the people you select as my guard, and choose the one I deem most appropriate... and this will only occur once Voldemort returns in body," countered Harry, glancing at Robert. "Non-magical folk have their own way of protecting themselves."

Dumbledore agreed tersely, suddenly realizing this wasn't going to be a walk in the park. He and Harry battled over other issues, mainly about him and Dumbledore's interference; the Potter Will would be unsealed and reread; Dumbledore would formally apologize for his role as unknowing accomplice to Harry's abuse and would be forced to testify if Harry pressed charges against the Dursley's; Dumbledore would also have to formally announce to the Daily Prophet his stepping down as Headmaster due to irrevocable differences between himself and a powerful student and his abuse of power – yet would not have to go into details. That would remain private between the parties in the room and Harry's friends.

In the end, a very unhappy but resigned Dumbledore left the conference room, and Harry sagged back in his seat. It had all seemed so... anti-climatic. Everything came down to signatures on

paper and a wizard's oath on pain of death and loss of magic. There were no wands drawn – with the exception of Harry's, but not as intended for a wizard's duel – and no insults truly escaped anyone's mouths.

To Harry... he was let down, slightly. He was expecting more from the 'Great' Albus Dumbledore. Instead, he saw a shrewd, calculated old man who truly believed that Harry was meant to kill Voldemort.

In the end, it wouldn't matter. Harry would try to kill him because of what he did in the past; he murdered Harry's parents. A friend of his parents – either Sirius Black, Remus Lupin or Peter Pettigrew – had betrayed them as well and they would pay. Other families, like the Weasley's, lost relatives that they never had the chance to meet. For those reasons alone, Harry would fight.

He would fight for the past.

He would fight for the present.

And he would fight for the future.

As he and Robert walked out of the conference room, shaking Duncan and Joseph's hands ("We'll send you a transcript soon, Mr. Potter," they promised), Harry reflected on his vow of fighting.

He smirked.

It sounded way too cheesy. Like a bad movie announcer's voice in the theatre; but Harry felt something flush up from his chest to his neck and ears and realized... as cheesy as his vow sounded... he might actually go through with that.

He snorted, ignoring Robert's look.

Maybe Hermione was right. He had a serious issue with saving people. He was going to be screwed later on, he was sure. The preteen sighed and rubbed his temples.

He was getting a headache.

Albus Dumbledore Resigns as Headmaster!

Rita Skeeter, London.

Today, June 1, 1993, is a day that must be marked in everyone's calendars and diaries around the world. Albus Dumbledore, a beacon of Light for over seventy years has stepped down from his post as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, effective once the 1993-1994 term begins.

Albus Dumbledore's reasons for resigning his post are due to differences between a powerful, young student – whether at Hogwarts is disputable, this reporter suggests that Mr. Harry Potter is the culprit – has sued the former Headmaster and together they reached an understanding. As per their understanding, Dumbledore will leave Hogwarts in capable hands. He has decided to fully embrace his political side and will be working full-time with the Wizengamot.

"My political work is important as well, and I believe I have been neglecting that for some time. While nurturing the future is a noble and just cause, I have decided that I might be best suited for politics. I have spent numerous years at Hogwarts, and as I reach my Golden Years, I would like to experience more," Dumbledore is quoted saying during a press conference.

"I will also be using the breaks in office to further my investigations in the life and times of censored, You-Know-Who, to better understand the madman's psyche."

Minerva McGonagall (64), the Transfiguration professor and current Head of Gryffindor, will replace Albus Dumbledore as the 72 Head of Hogwarts. Filius Flitwick (143) will take over as Deputy Head.

The position for Transfiguration professor will be open for new applicants immediately; all resumes are to be sent in by Express Owl. M McGonagall was also rumored to be conversing openly with

Headmistress and Deputy Head Anita Hartz and Nicolas Flamel of Wyckham Academy, asking on improvements to the Hogwarts curriculum, which has not changed since 1489.

Harry ignored the stares and whispers from his classmates, keeping his head down and concentrating on his open transfiguration text in front of him. Exams were upon the students – with the upper years already furiously writing their essays and theses papers for exclusive Herbology and Potions institutes worldwide – and most of the school had long fallen silent.

However, the news of Dumbledore's stepping down as Headmaster caused a stir. No one knew who the student was, but most people guessed it was Harry. There was, after all, only so much a boy could take.

His friends stood by him, silent in their support, and the professors rallied behind him as well. Fudge, surprisingly, had sent him a letter, thanking him, although Harry was unsure as to why.

"Mum and Dad always said that Fudge needed Dumbledore's suggestions to run his office properly; guess he was finally glad he can bother Dumbledore perpetually now," Blaise offered.

Minerva McGonagall was seen often at Wyckham, speaking to Hartz and even sitting in on some classes; most student ignored her (except those in transfiguration, she was a master of her field and her ease in turning a desk into a pig awed the upper years).

Harry didn't think about Dumbledore. He couldn't afford to with his marks on the line, and Sirius Black on the loose. He was ready to send the man an Owl and see if he would track him down and murder him. With the amount of studying the preteen was doing, Harry was almost considering it seriously as a blessing.

Finally, he was writing his exams and hopefully breezing through them. Once the two weeks of exams were written and over, his friends took to the large tree by the pond and enjoyed the lazy

summer weather, watching as other students frolicked and splashed, and read and played a pick-up game of Quidditch.

“Potter! Zabini!” called a deep voice.

The two boys looked up from their position on the grass; they were lying side-by-side, with Hermione and Susan next to Blaise, both reading a magazine together. Dean was drawing Neville this time, as the boy concentrated on his book of rare plants.

“Hullo Wood!” greeted Blaise jovially. “What’s that in your hand?”

“Don’t read it here!” the sixth year hissed, glancing left and right, passing the two boys the yellowed paper. “When you’re alone, open it!”

Blaise and Harry shared a look but shrugged, Harry resting back on the grass again; he tucked the paper into his back pocket and continued to cloud watch.

“Wonder what that was about?” asked Susan quietly, watching as Oliver Wood walked away, his hands in his pockets and whistling cheerfully.

Blaise shrugged; he was resting his weight on his two hands, placed slightly behind his body. “Hell if I know.”

“Blaise!”

“Sorry, Hermione,” simpered a contrite Blaise, batting his eyelashes at the girl. Hermione was not impressed.

“What are you going to do about Sirius Black?” she ended up asking Harry instead, glaring at Blaise at the same time.

“Dunno,” replied Harry airily. “We couldn’t find anything else, and all I can think of is having him meet me in a public place and go from there. He doesn’t know I can do magic so I have an upper hand.”

“Not if he AK’s you,” argued Dean, looking up from his charcoal smudged fingertips in dismay. “You have two choices then: duck or die.”

“What a choice,” Harry sighed. “Not like the last could happen, I think. I reckon only Voldemort can kill me.”

“Wanna jump in front of the Knight Bus and find out?” asked Blaise, wiggling his eyebrows.

Harry shot his best friend a glare. “Not particularly, unless, of course, it’s after you, Blaise.”

“You wound me, Harry!” joked the Italian, a hand to his heart and falling onto the grass, pretending to be heartbroken.

Harry sneered slightly, and Blaise threw some ripped up grass at the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry retaliated; Blaise looked about and found a chunk of dirt.

“You wouldn’t”—but Harry never finished the sentence. A clot of dirt hit him on his pristine, white button up.

Hermione groaned, slamming her open palm against her forehead as her head dropped. Susan sighed and raised the magazine, opening it fully to protect her face.

“You hit me!” exclaimed Harry in shock, looking at his stained shirt. Blaise sniggered. “You hit me with dirt!”

“That I did, Duke, and what a dirty one you are at that! Hardly presentable are you?” laughed Blaise, rolling on the grass.

Too bad he didn’t see the equally large clot of dirt hit him in his face as a reply.

Classes and exams wrapped up, and soon it was time for the students to return home, as another year at Wyckham ended.

Hermione was overheard numerous times jabbering about her upcoming trip to Spain; Neville and his Gran were going to their summer home in Cornwall and Dean would be taking art classes over the break.

Susan promised to send any inside news she heard from her Aunt, and was soon whisked away; soon it was just Harry and Blaise of their group, leaning outside against the garage wall by the kitchens. Somehow, a few of the older students had found a way to smuggle in cigarettes and were clustered near the two twelve-year-olds, enjoying a break.

"Coming to Bramasole this summer?" questioned Blaise idly.

"Dunno," replied Harry, his hands in his pockets. "I'll have to ask Robert and Heather. They might want to stay at the house with all the political stuff I stirred up."

Blaise nodded. "Yeah, makes sense."

The two lapsed into silence.

"Do you think he's going to stop?" Blaise suddenly asked.

Harry didn't need to ask who; he knew who his best friend was talking about. "Not a chance in hell. He's got political power now... a lot more power than he had as a Headmaster. He's going to make things difficult in the coming years, I know it."

"And You-Know—Voldemort?"

"He's coming, Blaise," said Harry softly, looking at the cobblestone path between the garage and the kitchen side door. "He's waiting for the right time and will make his move and then things are going to get ugly."

"He'll be after you," said Blaise, matter-of-factly.

"I know."

“And he’ll go after your friends.”

“I know.”

The two were silent, until:

“I’ll be right there beside you when you finish him off,” Blaise promised.

Harry turned his head to stare at his friend. “Don’t be ridiculous, Blaise, that’s suicide.”

“No, it’s not,” the slightly taller boy replied tartly. “I spoke to Flamel and Shacklebolt. They’re going to teach me the same things that you learnt from them next year. I’ll be behind you, but I’ll catch up. We’re taking mostly the same classes anyway. You can help me.”

“Why would you want to do that?” asked a perplexed, and humbled, Harry. “Your family... you’ll be in danger.”

“Already in danger, brat,” laughed Blaise. “Why not give ol’ Voldemort a reason to really come after me, instead of just being your friend?”

“He will want to kill you, Blaise!” argued Harry.

Blaise shrugged. “He’ll want to kill me anyway, Duke. Like I said, why not give him a reason?” he eyed his famous friend and then sighed. “You won’t change my mind. Consider it like this: I’m protecting you, while you’re off trying to protect everyone else. You need someone to watch your back, Potter.”

Harry sighed. “Fine,” he grumbled, clearly not happy. “But don’t think I like it.”

Blaise grinned. “I know.”

The two fell silent, again, watching as the upper years stubbed out their cigarettes and went around the garage, waving at the two as they passed by.

“Have a good summer, Potter, Zabini!” they called, disappearing from view.

Blaise and Harry shared a look. “Well,” began Harry with a smile, “You heard ‘em – let’s have a good summer!”

And with that said, another year at Wyckham officially ended.

Chapter Eighteen

June 30, 1993

Harry,

Hurrah! Summer break is officially upon us! Mum and Dad, of course, send their love and are wondering when you will be joining us at Bramasole this summer break. I told them that I would ask you, and hence: When will you be joining us at Bramasole?!?!

Mario has been speaking about you nonstop and now has Annabelle completely moonstruck. Do come here soon and charm my younger sister, Duke – then maybe I can have some peace and quiet around here. She keeps coming into my room and looking at our photos together. Brat!

I suppose we have no choice but to comply with Oliver Wood's wishes, huh? Wait, you have looked over the paper form he gave us, didn't you? If not, allow me to be the first to tell you – and if you have, skip to the next paragraph. Oliver applied for the team to go to Quidditch Camp in Scotland this summer! It's from July 3-28, and we stay there overnight.

Draco and Theo have already sent their replies to me and confirmed they will be there as well; something about Flint and Wood being mortal Quidditch enemies. Do say you'll come, Duke. It'll be lonely without my best mate there.

Dad's been in a right snit about Sirius Black as well. While we know the truth, and so do certain others, he's been jumping between incredibly worried and concerned for you and anger at the Ministry for bugging up as usual. And here's some news for you: your crazed murdering Godfather was spotted near Surrey. Do you think he thinks you're still at the Dursley's? Maybe he can give them a right scare.

Write back soon. And perhaps include a photo – for Annabelle!

Cheers,

Blaise

July 1, 1993

Dear Blaise,

You are a right pompous swot, you know that? I seem to be wooing young witches left, right and center without knowing it, and don't think just because you're my best mate that I'll make any exceptions for Annabelle! The Weasley Twins sent me a letter a few days ago – something about projected costs for rent and experiments, don't ask – and they mentioned this:

“You've seemed to win yourself another fan, Potter, in our sister this time. Ginny is absolutely over the moon with you, having grown up hearing the story of the Boy-Who-Lived. Your help at Flourish and Blotts, and then later in the Chamber of Secrets cinched the deal: prepare yourself mate, you might become Mr. Ginny Weasley in the future if you're not careful!”

That, I'm afraid, is rather frightening. I'm almost thirteen. Blaise – help!!!

Harry

PS: Robert and Heather have already signed the forms. I'll see you at Camp.

July 6, 1993

Hi boys!

I hope you're both enjoying Quidditch Camp and aren't doing anything that would make me go gray early. No, seriously. I mean that. And that means no Wonky Feints, Harry!!!!

Currently, my parents and I are traveling Southern Spain. The landscape is wonderful and there is a ton of wizard history here. I've picked up some gifts for the group, including your present, Harry! I'm sure you'll love it.

Mom and Dad are completely smitten with Figaro and he's taken to following them around – I think it's because they feed him scraps from the table, although I tell them not to. He's gained quite a bit of weight since school was let out...

With love,

Hermione

July 8, 1993

Duke,
Can you teach me to fly like you? I want to try out as the reserve Seeker for a team at Wyckham.
Don

Don,
Do your parents know how I fly?
Harry

Duke,
No...?
Don

Don,
Not a chance in hell.
Harry

July 12, 1993

Harry,

How's it going, mate? Enjoying Quidditch Camp with the team? The sports section of the Daily Prophet is getting some awesome pictures of you; they've already got scouts from all the National English teams watching you! Isn't that awesome? I know you're not happy with the newspaper circuit in general, but I've sent along some of the clippings.

I saw Dean in London yesterday – and let me tell you it took Gran ages to finally allow me out (I think Hartz had a hand in it, actually)! Dean and I went around London proper and he took me to McDonalds. Non-magical folk sure have weird food. It doesn't move fast like chocolate frogs, so why is it called 'fast food'?

Neville

July 15, 1993

Dear Harry,

How are you, sweetie? Holly sends her love and Sean has been more sour than usual, meaning he misses you (Robert says I should write that he misses his punching bag, but I hope that's not true, Harry!). Robert and I have found that the house is quiet without you here, and your room is far too empty.

Are you enjoying the camp? We've been getting the Daily Prophet to keep up with your escapades there, and it sounds wonderful. Blaise is looking well, too, so send him our love as well. Both of you look tan and healthy – they are feeding you enough, right?

When you get home, you'll need a haircut, dear. Your hair is growing fantastically long. You have beautiful eyes and shouldn't hide them behind a shaggy cut like that.

Write back when you have the time, sweetheart.

Much love,
Heather, Robert, Sean and Holly

July 21, 1993

Dear Duke,

Daddy and I are traveling Norway because we think we've found the mating migration route of the Crumple-Horned Snorkrack. I could bore you with all the details, but I don't think you'd appreciate it. I've sent along some of Daddy's back issues of the Quibbler to keep you busy while at Camp. I hope they amuse you – Daddy did a special on Sirius Black a few issues ago.

Luna

July 24, 1993

Dear Harry,

Hullo! Auntie has forbidden me to go anywhere near you when you are on a broomstick. I think you gave her a scare with your latest move at Camp, Harry. Some advantageous reporter caught your move. I believe the improvement of yours on the Wronski Feint will be in the next issue of Quidditch through the Ages. Beware, Harry, beware!

Hermione sent me a letter and we're meeting up at Diagon Alley on the 30th. Say you'll join us and the gang before your birthday? Also, are you doing anything again this year? Last year at your place was a ton of fun. Auntie would like to know so she can clear out my schedule. She has been learning proper Pureblood etiquette. Spare me, Duke – she's even offered for you to join in, being the Head of Potter. Interested? Be smart and say no thank you.

I'll see you soon,

Susan

July 31, 1998

HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY!!

Don

Mate,

Salutations on reaching your teenage years. Enjoy them, they'll go by fast enough, or, in your case, you might not live to see your twenties.

Working on his humor, your best mate,

Blaise

Duke,

I've sent along a snapshot of a Crumple-Horned Snorkracks. It's blurry, but I swear I saw one! Oh, and I've been meaning to say, you'll see a shaggy stray sometime soon. Have I ever mentioned that I sometimes spaz out like that? Sorry.

Luna

Mr. Potter,

Congratulations on reaching another year. We at Gringotts wish you all the best for the upcoming year and that your gold flows profitably.

Archibald Wallace & the British Gringotts Branch, et&

To our dear investor,

Enjoy. And then give feedback. Would write more but Mum is getting suspicious. See you in a month.

F&G

PS: Stay away from Ron. He's pissed at the extra schoolwork he was forced to do this summer. It's to catch up with your grade at Wyckham.

PPS: He and Ginny are coming to Wyckham. Percy's Head Boy at Hogwarts. Still a git.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday! I've sent along some copies of the sketches I've done over the past two years at Wyckham. If you like one a lot, send

it back and I'll colour it in for you, your choice – pastels, watercolors, charcoal, name it. Otherwise, enjoy! I'll see you soon,
Dean

DUKE!

Happy birthday!

Your girls,

Hermione & Susan

PS: we'd rather give you your birthday wishes in person, but enjoy, for the time being! See you tomorrow!!

Dear Mr. Potter,

Enclosed in this letter is a list of required texts for the upcoming 1993-1994 school year. Also enclosed is a selection of elective classes that you can sign up for. Please note that you may not take more than 4 electives, but must have a minimum of 2.

These electives may be continued on until you graduate, or until your fifth or sixth year when you can take year or two year courses on top of your continued electives or required classes.

Please mark which classes you wish to take and reply no later than August 5, 1993.

Optional classes include:

- Ancient Runes
- Arithmancy
- Art
- Astronomy+
- Biology
- Business
- Chemistry/ Physics
- Divination
- Drama
- Healing+
- Herbology

- Languages: Italian, German, French, Spanish, Russian, Cantonese, Mandarin, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek+
- Music
- Philosophy
- Politics
- Psychology

Note: All classes marked with (+) are also offered at fifth year as well

Harry – Donahue found out you used a sword at Hogwarts. I didn't stop to ask how, but he's removed one of your gym classes and set up fencing. Complain if you want, but I have a feeling he'll do it anyway.

Hartz

PS: Where's the sword now?!

Professors,

I wish to take Business, Chemistry and Politics as my electives. Thank you.

H. Potter

PS: Sword is somewhere safe. Would you like to be there when I tell Donahue about my handling technique and while he criticizes me, Headmistress?

The beginning of summer went by quietly and smoothly; Heather and Robert happily signed his consent form to go to Quidditch Camp, and only Holly bemoaned the loss of seeing her adoptive, other, older brother until later in the summer. Sean, now 16, was spending more time out with his friends and at the movies with his current girlfriend than at home.

School had finished on the 28, and the Woolworth's had Harry at home before dinnertime, eager to hear about the school year. No mention of Dumbledore was said.

Harry didn't unpack his school trunk; he only went over his ledgers to make sure there were no errors in his spending. Satisfied, he pulled

out his dirty laundry and sorted it, ready to give it a thorough washing and drying before he packed up and went off to Quidditch Camp.

The Pirates team had all consented to go, except for Fred and George; they claimed it was because their mother and father wanted them to stay home and support the family, especially after the Chamber of Secrets incident with Ginny. While Harry thought it was somewhat true, he also realized that the Camp cost nearly two hundred galleons for room, board, meals, and trainers. The Weasley family didn't have G400 to spend on a month-long training session, no matter what Oliver Wood asked.

However, the chance to see his best friend, and several Hogwarts acquaintances was too good to pass up. Not only could Harry improve on his Nimbus, but he could also schmooze. And if Erik Munsö came through, there would be the European Quidditch Cup in Denmark in August as well. The summer was shaping up to be awesome.

Those heading to the Scotland Highlands for Quidditch Camp were told to use the provided Portkey as their mode of transportation. The journey home would be provided by trained professions, by the same way.

Harry hugged Robert, Heather and Holly goodbye, and told Sean to stay out of trouble. The teen smirked back at Harry, "Funny. Though you ought to say that the next time you look in a mirror," before Harry felt the hook-like sensation in his naval and disappeared.

Harry landed on his bum on damp grass, next to several other teenagers all swearing from the rough ride.

Gathering his duffle bag – specially charmed to hold more than it looked like – and swinging his Nimbus 2000 over his shoulder, Harry made his way with the rest of the crowd toward several portable tables with letters stuck to them. Making his way to the table with "P" written in bold, gold ink, Harry waited in line patiently behind several other teenagers.

Harry guessed their ages ranged from thirteen to seventeen; since Oliver hadn't given the forms to Harry and Blaise beforehand, Harry supposed that there was a minimum age requirement for the camp.

Finally at the head of the line, Harry greeted the young man behind the table.

"Name?" he asked curtly.

"Potter, Harry," replied Harry tersely, in a similar tone.

The man looked up, surprised, and upon seeing Harry's face and scar, nodded. He proceeded to flick through several folders before finding Harry's, and then handed it to him. He then checked his name off on a separate parchment.

"In there you'll find your cabin number, your Quidditch schedule, and several workshops you can sign up for. Please have that done for tonight and handed in to your residence don," the man finished, signaling the boy behind Harry to come forward.

Not bothering to thank the man, Harry walked off, following the map provided in the envelope until he reached the cabin area. Following the directions, he soon reached Cabin C-4 and entered. He was pleasantly surprised to see Blaise already there.

"Hi Blaise," Harry greeted his best friend. "Got here early, did you?"

Blaise nodded his greeting, putting his Quidditch gear away. "Mario kept harping how it was unfair I got to go to Quidditch camp so I finally left when Mum and Dad let me... I couldn't stand listening to him anymore."

"He's starting at Wyckham this year," added Harry gently, watching his friends' reaction.

Blaise groaned. "Please don't remind me. It's enough with your Yearlings following you all year, but now my younger brother will join in."

“He’ll have the second years to look up to, as he becomes a Yearling. Don’t worry,” soothed Harry with a laugh, claiming his own bed. The two continued to small talk until the cabin door opened again.

“Blaise, Harry,” coolly greeted Draco, with Theodore Nott on his heels. “Guess they stuck us together?”

“It’s probably by year, Draco,” commented Theo simply, rolling his eyes and dumping his bag on the bed next to Harry’s. “And since there are only four beds, I suppose this is it for our cabin.”

“Here, here,” chirped Blaise from across Harry. He was looking over the workshops. “D’you know which workshops you’ll take, Duke?”

Harry looked up with a scowl. “Please don’t tell me you’ve adopted that stupid nickname of Luna’s?”

Blaise sent his friend a quirky grin. “Why not? It suits you.”

Harry’s scowl deepened and he refused to answer, while Blaise told Draco and Theo about Luna and her obsessive desire to call Harry ‘Duke’ and nothing else. While the other two Hogwarts teens laughed, Harry read over his workshop selections and checked those he was interested in – Skills for Seekers, Broom Maintenance, Flying Tactics, Broom Design, Seeker History, and Scrimmage. His days would be filled with flying with his teammates and practicing their skills.

Dinner was boisterous as the Pirates teammates met up and claimed a table of their own, and invited Draco and Theo to join. Several other people were there that Harry knew and recognized, and some he didn’t who knew Draco and Theo and were obviously from Hogwarts.

As the weeks flew by, Harry noticed a significant improvement to his flying skill, and to the number of reporters who arrived at the scrimmage games. Names were drawn randomly and given lots, and Harry found himself often against his own teammates and friends. It was during one of these games that Harry improved on the Wronski Feint, quite by accident.

Known as an evasive move meant to confuse the opponent Seeker, the Feint was meant as a steep dive with a look of concentration to show that the Feint-Seeker had spotted the Snitch, when in reality, they hadn't. A Seeker who was skilled enough would be able to pull out of the sloped dive within feet of the ground and pull up unharmed while the other Seekers would either crash or pull out sooner.

Harry took it a step further; during a game he went into a steep dive, pulling off a perfect Wronski Feint as his opponent followed. He was shooting head-first, directly into the ground, following the Snitch – his move wasn't a ploy.

Within a few feet of the ground, Harry caught the Snitch but had to make a split-second decision: crash or somehow, miraculously, pull out. Pushing his broom past its limits, he closed his eyes and braced for impact, all the while hoping against hope that he'd stop.

Harry was thrown chin-first to the dirt ground, skinning it and rubbing it raw and start to bleed. However, when he rolled over and opened his eyes, he saw that his broom had come to an abrupt halt mere feet from the ground in a dead stop. It hung there, in an upside-down 'T' angle, vibrating in the air gently and waiting for its rider to come back on.

Stupefied, Harry touched it and watched as the broom nearly purred and righted itself parallel to the ground.

Feeling about as stupid as he could get, Harry turned to the nearest referee whose whistle had fallen out of his open mouth in surprise, and asked, "Well, what the hell was that?"

A week later and Harry saw his first Howler; Hermione sent it, blaming him when she found a gray strand of hair on her head. Blaise muttered something about that maybe being an improvement, and Harry silenced him with a glare that made the other teen clam up.

Draco and Theo teased Harry about it, and Harry was secretly glad that Draco was referring to Hermione as that "Muggleborn geek,"

instead of using the term 'Mudblood.' He thought it was a vast improvement and that there might be hope for the young Malfoy. Theo Nott was happy enough to follow Draco's lead as well, and Harry never heard a derogatory word out of either of their mouths.

While at lunch, and reading the latest letter from Luna – which had Harry smiling all day – Blaise asked Draco, "How's being at home for a full week and a half then, before coming here?"

Draco shrugged. "All right, I suppose. Mum was in a right snit, as usual, about me dirtying myself up, but Father was rather anxious about something. Kept rubbing his arm and was snappish."

Harry frowned. Rubbing his arm? He wondered.

The conversation then changed to the upcoming Hogwarts term, and if Draco and Theo thought people might transfer back to Hogwarts from Wyckham.

However, Harry kept quiet, wondering still of Mr. Malfoy rubbing his arm. Vaguely, Harry remembered one of the articles his friends had been reading on Sirius Black about how all Death Eaters had tattoos on their arms, which burned when their master called.

Grimly, Harry connected the two. It seemed like Voldemort was making a move earlier than he thought.

As Quidditch Camp came to an end, Harry began collecting early letters from Neville, Dean, Hermione and Susan about his upcoming birthday and Neville's as well. Neville would do his on the 29th, and Harry would have his on August 1st.

He was looking forward to receiving his school letter and choosing his electives, and seeing his friends. Blaise was great fun and all, but there was only so much of his best friend that he could take before he sought out Neville and Dean's much quieter personalities.

On the final day of Camp, Oliver celebrated having another great Quidditch season and happily told his teammates over and over how Puddlemere United's scout, Darcy Wallace, had offered him a tentative contract upon his graduation.

Once back at home, Harry unpacked everything in his trunk and happily retold several Quidditch matches to the enthralled Heather, who helped Harry with his laundry, sorting his clothes. She watched him as Harry spoke with his hands, gesturing wildly and giving a soundtrack as well.

She gasped in all the right spots, scolded Harry for his dangerous stunts, and by the time they were done with the laundry, she ruffled his hair and told him when dinner would be ready.

The realization that such a simple, motherly act was done without thought left Harry slightly speechless and teary. It was nice to have a mother's love, even if it wasn't his birth mother.

The next day, Harry took another Portkey to Neville's. Several Wyckham students were already there, and so were all of the new Marauders. Harry wished Neville a very happy birthday, giving him a rare book on herbology and casually mentioning that he might need it this year.

As it neared his own thirteenth birthday, Harry found himself wondering more and more about his supposed deranged godfather and the mysterious Remus Lupin. Why hadn't the latter contacted him? His name was enough times in the newspaper for the entire International wizard community to know who he was; had Dumbledore done something, threatened him?

Curious, he penned a letter to the mysterious man that his father had been good friends with.

Dear Mr. Lupin,

I'm not sure if you remember who I am, but this is Harry James Potter, the son of your old friend James Potter. I was wondering if we could

possibly meet. I would like to know more about my parents from a close friend of theirs.

Please write back if you're inclined to have a visit.

Sincerely,
Harry Potter

Although incredibly vague and slightly naïve, Harry thought it was good enough. However, upon staring at the paper for several minutes, he sighed and got another sheet out.

Sirius Black,

I would like to know your intentions on myself. Do you plan on killing me and helping Voldemort rise to power again or is there more to your story than the public knows?

Sincerely hoping not to die anytime soon,
Harry Potter

Nodding to himself, Harry figured that was as good as it was going to get, and used tape to attach a pencil to the Sirius Black letter. With a whistle, he called Hedwig over and asked her to deliver Remus Lupin's letter first, and then to stay with Sirius Black until he replied.

"Unless he tries to eat you," he finished, "then fly the hell away as fast you can, Hedwig."

Giving an annoyed hoot, and a look that translated as do-you-think-I'm-stupid? Hedwig was soon flying off through an open window.

Unsure of what either would be like, Harry decided not to worry about it and if Sirius Black was really going to kill him, he'd make the most of his birthday the next day.

On the morning of July 31, Harry awoke to the smell of bacon, pancakes, and eggs, and a large pile of presents. Heather and

Robert had outdone themselves, spoiling Harry with a tiny TV for his bedroom at their house, and several new items of clothing.

What was a lark, however, was that they somehow collaborated with his friends and professors at school. The Woolworth's gave Harry another football jersey in the school colours of black and blue, and written across the back and above his number '7' was the name DUKE.

"I don't know whether to thank you or curse my friends for their large mouths," Harry replied with a sigh, staring at the jersey. "This will only fuel them!"

"It's a cute nickname," argued Heather, smiling widely. "Sure, you really are a Duke in the peerage, but it's regal and powerful, quite like how you are."

"You think I'm regal and powerful?" asked a bewildered Harry.

Robert smiled over the rim of his coffee mug. "Harry, you have more power than any other thirteen year old I know. You also... have this presence about you that commands attention and respect, despite being thirteen. You'll grow up to be a powerful, charismatic and respected man. That's why the name 'Duke' suits you."

Harry looked at the jersey again and shrugged. "Well, don't think I'll begin answering to it at home too!"

The threat lasted only ten minutes, when Holly wandered into the living room and tugged on Harry's t-shirt, demanding, "Duke! Up!"

Harry sighed as his guardians laughed themselves silly. "Yes, Princess," he replied and hefted the five-year-old into his arms, carrying her outside. His presents could wait; he was going to go play in the dirt with his little sister.

That evening, as Harry finished hooking up the TV in his room and the VCR his guardians gave him as well, an unfamiliar owl swooped

in through the open window in the tower and landed on the back of a chair.

Glancing up at the hoot, Harry murmured, “who’re you?” and took the offered letter. The owl then flew away in the night.

Frowning, Harry pulled out his wand and began muttering revealing spells, searching for Portkeys, tracking spells, or any hexes. Finding none, he shrugged and opened the parchment.

Dear Harry,

I must confess that I was surprised when I received your owl. I was under the impression that you lived in a purely Muggle household, and that your guardians would not appreciate such things.

I would very much like to meet up with you and tell you stories about your parents and our days at Hogwarts. Do you mind telling me what house you are in? I’ve been so out of the loop when it comes to all things magical, due to my illness and odd-end jobs that I haven’t been able to keep up with all the news of our world.

How does Monday, August 2 sound? Where would you like to meet? By the way, happy early birthday, Harry.

Take your time in replying. I look forward to hearing from you,
Remus

Harry frowned. It seemed as though this Remus Lupin character hadn’t been around anything magical for quite some time if he thought Harry was at Hogwarts, and thinking he lived in a purely Muggle household. Well, that was a bit true, but Heather and Robert knew about magic and didn’t mind it. Could he possibly mean his Aunt and Uncle?

Shrugging, Harry placed the parchment on his desk, next to an issue of the Quibbler that Luna sent, and got back to fiddling with the TV. It was barely ten minutes later when Hedwig returned.

Ah, now this is what I was waiting for, the teen thought with a near vicious smile. He was eager to see what Sirius Black had written back in reply.

Hedwig looked no worse for comfort, and wasn't missing any body parts, so Harry concluded that Sirius Black was a fairly decent man, for not eating his owl. Obviously he was on the run and had to make due with whatever he could rummage, but Harry's respect went up for the man not resorting to the easy solution.

The writing was scraggly and looked more like chicken scratch than actual words, but it was still legible.

Harry,

There is always more to the story. I was not your parents' secret keeper. Peter Pettigrew was. I am your godfather, I would never hurt you.

Could we meet and talk? I'm near Lily's sister in Little Whining.
Padfoot

Harry's eyebrows rose. Little Whining? Was the man daft? Harry quickly reached for a new sheet of paper and scribbled: I am nowhere NEAR Little Whining. If you were trying to kill me, you have failed spectacularly. I am in Rochester. Come and fix your mistake, please.
– H.

Hedwig was called over, and almost exasperatedly, she stuck out a talon for Harry to attach the letter and nipped gently at his fingertips.

"I know," whispered Harry, "but considering I don't write people much, please?"

Hedwig hooted gently and was off again; Harry didn't know when she'd return. He'd just make the best of his birthday tomorrow and go from there.

Harry preferred small get-togethers, but decided that he would also invite his Yearlings and Mario, Blaise's younger brother. Blaise and Hermione arrived first, eager to help with setting up food and greeting the Woolworth's; however, they were ushered all the way up to Harry's tower, with Mario tagging along.

Harry ended up deciding that a low-key birthday party watching some action and horror films on his new TV and VCR was ideal. Blaise claimed the easy chair for himself and Mario ogled Harry's broom while Hermione went straight to his bookshelves.

Susan, Neville, Dean and Colin Creevey came soon afterward, followed by Don and Luna, and then it was party time.

The group settled happily in front of the TV and both Hermione and Susan shrieked and screamed in all the right places during the horror movies while their male friends laughed. Luna, however, seemed to take everything in stride.

The group enjoyed several movies, including *Army of Darkness* (which made Harry laugh incredibly hard during), *Bram Stoker's Dracula* featuring Gary Oldman (where Hermione made the offhand comment of Dracula looking eerily similar to the crazed wanted posters of Sirius Black in Diagon Alley), and *Silence of the Lambs*. It was a good thing Heather and Robert didn't monitor what Harry and Sean had rented to watch or else they'd never have been allowed to see the films.

Once the credits rolled for *Silence of the Lambs*, Dean rose and stretched, saying he ought to be getting ready to go home soon – as it was nearly ten pm already – and that his parents would be by to take him home.

The others rose and were also getting ready, picking up discarded jackets and bowls of half-finished popcorn and empty Coke cans. Just as Mario excused himself, heading to the stairs to go to the bathroom, Hedwig soared back in through the window, carrying a piece of paper.

Harry immediately jumped up and waylaid Blaise's reaching fingers.

“Harry?” his best friend questioned. The two were usually ok with getting each other’s mail, or whoever was closest to the owl at the time.

Harry ignored his friend and their concerned glances as he snatched the paper and cooed at Hedwig, reading it quickly.

H – Have changed direction. Will be in your area tomorrow. Can we meet? Name where and when. Padfoot

“Harry,” said Blaise again, this time with a command behind his tone. Harry shot his friend a look, easily saying that this was not the time or place to ask anything of him, and Blaise, recognizing it for what it was, shut his mouth with a snap.

Hermione glanced between the two; she knew of their blood bond and what it allowed each to do or so, and figured this was one of those times that she would not know what was going on.

Harry, as he finished reading the letter, nodded to himself and put the paper down, waving his wand over it to conceal the writer’s identity.

Soon his friends were leaving, with the exception of Blaise, who was staying the night, and Harry was gathering his presents and putting them away near his TV so he and Blaise wouldn’t trip over them in the morning.

“Who was it from?” Blaise finally asked, fluffing his pillow as he stretched in his sleeping bag.

“Sirius Black,” replied Harry. He watched for his friends’ reaction out of the corner of his eye.

“Why?” asked Blaise, tucking his hands beneath his head as he looked over at his friend. He crossed his ankles over each other and settled comfortably on his back.

Harry frowned. “Why not? We weren’t getting anywhere. I might as well ask him myself.”

He paused, and then continued as he went under his own sleeping bag, "You'll be coming along, right? To watch my back."

"Duh."

Harry smiled in the dark and soon fell asleep.

At four the next afternoon, Harry and Blaise were at Rochester Castle. Having paid their £3 student fare, they wandered around the castle, waiting for Sirius Black to meet them. Although he was taking a risk in a public location to meet the two, they had decided to meet somewhere inside the building's many nooks and crannies.

Sirius didn't know that Blaise was coming, and Harry wanted that as a trump card. Now away from the thinning crowd of tourists, Harry leaned against a cool stone wall and crossed his arms.

He didn't have to wait long, when there soon was a snuffling noise and a large, but underfed and scraggily black dog sat on its haunches in front of Harry and wagged its tail, whining pitifully.

Harry stared at the dog. The dog stared back. Finally, Harry exasperatedly threw his hands up and bent down to be eye level with the dog.

"You have got to be kidding," Blaise's voice came from the opposite side of the hallway. "The dog is Sirius Black?"

"Well, I don't see anyone else here, Blaise," sniped Harry finally, running a hand through his hair. "Guess your cover is blown. What's he going to do, nibble us to death?"

The dog huffed, blowing out air and growled at Harry. Harry bared his teeth in return.

The two teens looked around and with a nod, Sirius Black transformed back into his human self. He was raggedy and unshaved, with long tangled black hair and sunken cheekbones.

“Man,” breathed Blaise in awe. “You look like shit.”

Sirius turned slowly to Blaise and grinned – a row of even, yellowed teeth. “Thank you,” he rasped.

Harry wordlessly handed the man his water bottle. Sirius took it with a nod of thanks and had a few gulps.

The three waited until Sirius felt comfortable. He leaned slowly against the wall and sat on the floor. Blaise and Harry copied him, their eyes never leaving the man’s form.

“Where to start?” the older man asked, his hands shaking as he lifted the water bottle for another drink.

“How about the beginning?” suggested Blaise.

Harry nodded.

Sirius looked over the two, and finally sighed, “You two remind me of what James and I were like when we were younger. You look like we did, as well – Harry, you look so much like your father.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Harry evenly. “I don’t even have any photographs.”

Sirius looked troubled for a moment before sighing and leaning back against the stone wall. “My fault.”

“Perhaps,” Harry offered. “But I won’t know until you tell me.”

With Sirius’s head tilted back and up, Harry and Blaise couldn’t see the tears that gathered, but did notice when he raised a hand to wipe them away.

“On October 15, 1981, I thought I was too obvious a secret keeper. So I suggested a change,” began Sirius slowly. “I suggested Peter, because I thought Remus was the traitor.”

“And he betrayed you,” finished Blaise evenly. “Peter Pettigrew was a Death Eater.”

“Is,” corrected Sirius. “Is. He yelled for the whole street to hear when I cornered him, ‘How could you, Sirius? Lily and James!’ and then cut off his finger and blew half the street up.”

“Where did he go? Apparated?” asked Blaise, with a frown. Harry noticed him fingering his wand in his sweater sleeve. Despite the warm summer weather, it was chilly in the cold, stone castle and having longer sleeves hid their wands from eyes.

Harry shook his head. “If he’s,” he jerked his thumb in Sirius’s direction, “is an animagus, then so is Pettigrew.”

“He’s a rat,” offered Sirius with a snarl. “I should’ve known from his form that he would betray us anyway.”

“Not true!” Blaise frowned. “Rats are... uh... small. And useful... for... um...” he slumped his shoulders under the Harry and Sirius’s incredulous gaze. “Yeah, they suck. Rats suck.”

Sirius gave a bark-like laugh and smiled. “You’re a funny one, kid. What’s your name?”

“Zabini,” Blaise said slowly. “Blaise Zabini.”

Sirius’s eyes widened and he turned to Harry. “What house are you in?”

“Eh?” Harry asked stupidly. “What house?”

“At Hogwarts?” Sirius continued.

Blaise and Harry shared a look before Blaise burst out laughing and Harry scowled. "Why must everyone I meet assume I attend Hogwarts?"

"You... don't?" asked Sirius in surprise.

"No."

Sirius frowned. "But I saw your picture in the newspaper." He reached in to his striped Azkaban prison wear. Harry felt more than saw Blaise tense.

Watching carefully, Sirius noted their anxiety and slowly removed the crumpled newspaper article from his shirt. He handed it to Harry who took it, frowning, and read it over.

"It's from when we were playing at school, Blaise," confirmed Harry, smiling slightly at the picture of the team and the one of him and Blaise. "When we played against the Monsters."

Sirius looked confused.

Harry looked up, handed the paper back and began, "I think you need to understand some things, Sirius."

Slightly brightening, Sirius asked, almost breathlessly, "Then you believe me?"

Blaise and Harry shared a look. "For now. We've looked over the Auror reports and newspaper clippings and my own parents' wills. Nothing adds up. Until, however, we see Pettigrew..." Harry shrugged. "As long as you don't plan on killing me, I think I'm okay with having you around."

"I'm a wanted wizard," argued Sirius. "Where would I stay? Where would I go?"

Blaise giggled and when Harry looked at him with raised eyebrows, he elaborated, "I can just see it... 'Heather... Robert... this dog

followed me home. Can I keep it?' You know they'll say yes as soon as Holly sees him."

Harry nodded, thoughtfully. "Mind staying in dog form a bit longer, Sirius?"

The man shook his head.

"Then I suppose we have a new family pet," confirmed Harry. "Come on, on the way back to the house Blaise and I will explain about Wyckham Academy."

Sirius smiled, one without his yellow teeth, and transformed back into his dog animagus form. Blaise whistled.

"Gotta learn how to do that, Duke," he said wistfully. "Looks bloody awesome."

Harry rolled his eyes.

That evening, Harry, Blaise and Sirius (back in human form) were in Harry's room, listening to Sirius tell the two teens about the things he and his friends – the Marauders – got into. Harry explained how he and his friends took the name as their own, but they didn't do pranks.

Sirius looked slightly put out, but accepted that Harry wasn't James.

The three were laughing so hard that they didn't notice Heather knocking loudly on Harry's door, until they heard her come up the creaking stairs.

Sirius transformed and scurried under Harry's bed, while Blaise hid the dinner leftovers they nicked for him.

"Harry, did you want to go with Sean to the mall tomorrow to get a new pair of swimming trunks?" Heather breathlessly asked as she came to the top of the stairs, entering Harry's domain.

“Uhhh...” Harry stalled, looking confused. “I thought I had enough.”

“Oh. Well, Sean wants an excuse to take you to the mall with Robert,” continued Heather, reaching down and grabbing an empty plate the boys had been sharing. “Or maybe the two of you will go see a film and –”

Blaise and Harry shared an uneasy look as Heather stopped talking, staring at Harry’s bed. Two yellow eyes looked back at her.

“Harry.”

“Yes, Heather?”

“Is that a dog under your bed?” she blinked thoughtfully, stretching to her full height.

“Yeeeeess,” hedged Harry, stretching the vowel.

Sirius shuffled out from under the bed on his belly, whining, with his tail thumping loudly on the hardwood floor.

Blaise rolled his eyes at the display.

Heather stared at the dog a bit longer, before turning to Harry and saying, “I don’t want to know. Really. Not right now at least. You can tell Robert and me all about it tomorrow.”

Harry let out a sigh of relief.

Heather turned and was heading down the steps when she called over her shoulder, “Oh, and Harry?”

Harry looked up.

“Don’t forget, sweetie, that Robert and I know a lot more about the magical world than you seem to think,” said finished, shooting a glance at the dog who audibly gulped.

Harry groaned and Blaise’s jaw dropped.

“You are so screwed, mate,” he finally said to Harry, staring at where his friends’ guardian last was.

Harry’s head hit his open palms in reply.

Robert, Sean and Harry went to the mall in the morning, with Blaise having returned home to Bramasole the previous evening. Harry was slightly worried when Heather said she was going to see how well behaved the dog was, but figured that since Sirius was really a human he could understand verbal commands easily.

He hoped.

When the three men returned to the house, Harry was surprised to find that Heather was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of tea cupped in her hands, Holly on the floor drawing with crayons, and Sirius Black in his human form across from Heather with a coffee mug.

He looked better, with a haircut that resembled something passable by society’s standards; his hair wasn’t around his waist anymore, but in a short crop. He was wearing jeans of Sean’s and Robert’s sweater and socks.

The bags of electronics and movies the three had bought hit the floor in surprise. Harry felt a burn in his chest and wondered if it was heartburn.

Heather turned, greeting them with a wide smile. Her eyes rested on Harry. On top of the heartburn, Harry was getting a migraine. He so wasn’t ready for this. Give him Dumbledore and Voldemort any day. Angry mothers – thanks, he’d pass.

“Ok there, Harry – you’ve got some ‘splaining to do!”

Harry groaned.

AN: I hope addressed some issues that people were wondering about in reviews, or wrote back to explain them. Longer chapter due to me being busy with final essays coming up. Probably one, or two, more updates between now and the end of March when exam period starts.

Yay! Sirius arrives. Remus in the next chapter, and where has he been all this time? Things become a bit more interesting... Dark Marks? Voldemort planning something? What's Dumbledore planning? A filler chapter but something to pass the time until school starts for our young hero.

Not the best chapter, but the best I could do for now. I'll revise as time goes on. So, enjoy! Considering I've been sick the past two days (again!), and I got my tragus pierced on Sunday and have been itchy and in some pain from it, I've put out what I could.

Any problems, point them out and they'll be fixed.

Oh, and you lot at Dark Lord Potter? I love cruising your forum board and reading what you think of the story. It's very interesting. Seriously. And for your information, I am female, not male. :-)

Kneazle Feb.03.07

Chapter Nineteen

“How’d Heather take it?”

“Pardon?” Harry looked up from his Shoot Monthly magazine. He and his friends were back at Wyckham Academy for their third year; it was their first night back, and it was also the time when their schooling began to take on a more serious air. There were more courses and electives, and a longer ‘curfew’ – despite Blaise and Harry never following it.

Blaise rolled his eyes and turned in his swivel office chair at his desk in their shared dorm room. He was already starting his politics text. “Don’t be daft – Heather, how did she take Padfoot in human form, you gob?”

“Oh,” replied Harry tonelessly.

Blaise laughed.

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“... and just what were you thinking? Were you even thinking at all? And you took Blaise along with you! You could have been hurt! Or worse, killed! And Blaise went along with you – I wouldn’t be able to look Francesca in the eye after telling her that her son was dead because of my idiot ward! What if Sirius really did want to hurt you? Who in their right minds sends a letter to a known murderer? You’d actually trust the fathers’ school books, from a time when things had changed to now? Do you really think you can face a fully grown wizard and fight them? I don’t care if you had your wands and the Ministry tracking spells are off them – it was a completely idiotic, stupid, insane idea and you are so grounded, young man!!!”

Harry sat at the kitchen table, his head bowed as he listened to Heather rant about him and Blaise going to see Sirius. Sean and Robert had already left the kitchen long ago, taking Holly out for ice cream in the warm weather.

That left Heather, Harry, and Sirius.

Sirius was very quiet, listening to Heather – Harry wasn't too sure how to take this. Sirius was supposed to be his godfather, but the man wasn't even interrupting or saying anything. He had also moved from the kitchen table to stand next to the countertop, away from the scene. He wanted to be out of the crossfire, apparently.

"Can I say something?" Harry finally spoke up. Heather glared at him. Harry felt his face burn red in embarrassment. "I'll take that as a no, then..."

"Harry, you could've been hurt," sighed Heather, running her hands through her blonde hair.

"I'm not a baby that needs to be taken care of!" Harry snapped back, feeling his anger rising.

Heather frowned and quickly replied, "Don't take that tone with me, young man! And you're only thirteen! You might be able to hold your own against others but not against fully grown and rigorously trained wizards!"

"I'm already taking classes with Shacklebolt and Flamel!" replied Harry.

Sirius looked up here. "Flamel? As in, Nicholas Flamel?"

Heather nodded, turning to Harry's godfather. "Flamel is the potions and alchemy professor at Wyckham Academy, where Harry attends. He's been teaching Harry Occlumency."

Sirius looked a bit star struck, but then snapped his jaw shut with an audible click and sat silent.

Heather turned back to Harry. "I don't care that you're taking extra classes with Shacklebolt and Flamel, Harry Potter – and I certainly don't care about any bull prophecy between you and Voldemort! You are a thirteen year old boy and instead of thinking you're mature

enough to handle yourself, you can sit your behind down and realize that there are others who actually care about you! Especially if you get hurt or not! It's our job to take care of you and we like doing it!"

Harry flushed with embarrassment and anger, especially at the not-so-subtle dig about his life with the Dursleys.

His anger won out. "In case you haven't realized Heather, you are only my guardian, you are not my mother! She's dead!"

"I know that," snapped Heather back, her own cheeks flushed. "But that doesn't mean I don't love you any less or more than she would have!"

"You don't know me!" Harry shouted back.

"And you don't obviously know me as well as you think!" Heather shot back. "I'm stubborn and I won't back down on this, Harry. You chose me and Robert to be your guardians, which means that we dictate the rules around here and as a minor you will follow them!"

"You can't make me!" Harry replied childishly.

"Oh, yes I can!"

"No, you can't! I can run away. I can do magic without the Ministry tracking it since the tracking spells are off, I can survive! I have money in my trust account at Diagon Alley, I can run and hide!" yelled Harry, breathing heavily.

Heather raised a single eyebrow. "You?" she laughed. "Harry Potter, the boy who spent the first half of his second year at school depressed about how he had to save the world – you would run away? What a joke!"

Harry felt mortified. He would never run and hide from his destiny, whether it was set in stone or not. Running didn't solve anything, and yet, here he let his anger take control of what he wanted to say.

Was that what he wanted to say though? Was it really what he thought subconsciously? That he didn't want to be stuck with the weight of the world on his shoulders? That he didn't want to be anyone's savior?

Harry sighed, his body curling in on itself slightly, and the anger rushed out of him as easily as it had come in. "I'm sorry," he barely whispered. Heather heard it though.

She sighed and ran a hand through her blonde hair. "I'm sorry too, Harry. But you still shouldn't have done it. You were lucky."

Harry nodded. "I know." He paused. "I'm supposed to meet Remus Lupin tomorrow."

Heather wanted to let her head hit the kitchen tabletop in exasperation. It seemed when Harry Potter did something, he did it in spades.

Sirius glanced at Harry; he had a light tinge of pink spreading across his cheeks, as he seemed to know what Heather was thinking. Doing his best to placate the concerned (and rightfully so, Sirius thought; if he were in charge of Harry's wellbeing he couldn't let the kid out of the house) parent, Sirius spoke up.

"Remus Lupin was a friend of mine, and Harry's father. He believes I'm the traitor, so he won't have anything nice to say about me, I'm afraid," offered Sirius. He took a sip from his now cool tea. He placed the mug back on the tabletop with a clack against the granite, and looked over at Harry.

"He wants to meet," replied Harry, looking down at the tiled kitchen floor. "I sent off a letter to him and you the same day because I wanted to know a bit about my parents... and because I don't like sitting around and waiting for things to come to me."

Heather snorted. Harry shot her a dirty look – one she didn't see, thankfully – and then asked Sirius, "What sort of person is he? Remus Lupin, I mean?"

“He’s a good fellow; very bookish. Although he keeps up with the news – he would’ve known about Harry not being in Hogwarts.” Sirius frowned and tapped a finger against the counter in a rhythm. “That’s really odd then, if he doesn’t know you’re at Wyckham. I had an excuse – I was in Azkaban.”

“Something we’ll figure out later, I assure you,” Heather replied sternly, wagging a finger now at Sirius. “I’m surprised the wizard world doesn’t have any good, honest lawyers! What were they thinking—”

“They weren’t,” sighed both Harry and Sirius together; they shared a grin and both chuckled. A bond was being forged between the two.

“He wouldn’t hurt Harry,” said Sirius, thinking over his words. “And besides,” finished Sirius, “when I was incarcerated, there wasn’t any lawyer who would want to take my case. It was in-and-out; I believe the saying is...”

Sirius fell silent, and then remembered Harry’s previously question. “Remus has... a disease that makes it impossible... or nearly impossible, I don’t know if the laws have changed... to have a wife and a family. We all loved James like a brother, so Harry, as his son, was our son as well. We took care of our own.”

Heather nodded. “Well, when you see Remus, Robert or myself will be going with you. No more heroics, Harry!”

Harry sighed, humbled. “Yes, Heather.”

She pointed a single, manicured finger vaguely in the direction of his bedroom, and Harry took the hint. He was grounded. Pausing at the doorway between the kitchen and hallway, Harry asked over his shoulder, “Does this mean I’m not going to Bramasole to visit Blaise?”

“Out!!!” was his reply.

“I’ll take that as a no,” muttered Harry, heading to his room.

Blaise was lying on his bed, the bedcovers all messy as he rolled around, laughing loudly. "So that's why you didn't come!"

Harry frowned, rearranging family photographs and his portable radio on top of his dresser. "Yeah, yeah," he frowned at Blaise and muttered darkly, "laugh it up."

"Oh, I will," chuckled Blaise, catching his breath, with his arms wrapped around his stomach. He rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. "Did you ever meet Remus Lupin then?"

"Yeah," answered Harry coyly, now punishing his friend. "I did."

He moved to his bed and sat on the edge, leaning over to retrieve the family album that Remus – and later Sirius – made for him. Harry had placed it in the vacant shelf below his bedside table.

"Well?" drawled Blaise, "are you going to bloody tell me?!"

"Maybe not," smirked Harry back, glancing at his friend over the rim of his glasses. "You don't deserve to know after laughing at your best friend."

Blaise waved a dismissive hand. "Bollocks! I can't tell anyone about this anyway without your permission, so I'd make the best use of it, shouldn't I?"

Harry playfully scowled. "Bugger!"

"Wanker!" shot back Blaise.

"Twat!"

Harry grinned in triumph when Blaise did reply right away and began the next part of his summer, and his meeting with Remus Lupin.

Heather was the one who decided to join Harry in meeting Remus; Harry thought it was because she was still pissed at him, but it seemed more likely that she was along because Harry and Remus agreed to meet at a nearby mall. Heather wanted to shop.

While Heather was ogling an expensive and unnecessary Gucci bag, contemplating buying it or not, Harry stood next to her, arms crossed and leaning against the wall next to the shop, looking incredibly bored. He didn't even have to act.

Within a few minutes of sighing and shifting his weight, Harry noticed a man watching him. He was on the short side – but a fair bit taller than Harry would probably be when he was fully grown – with salt-and-pepper brown hair. He wore scruffy jeans, a t-shirt with light khaki jacket and runners.

However, it was the three scars that ran down his cheek that caught Harry's attention; Sirius had told him that Remus Lupin would look distinctly out-of-place, but it wasn't until Harry spotted that man that he understood.

He nodded at the man to show he saw him. Remus walked forward through the crowd, slowing down or spending up to avoid hitting shoppers. Harry took the time to nudge Heather's side, drawing her attention away from the Gucci bag.

"Robert would go apocalyptic if you came home with a £1,500 designer bag," he offered as an explanation.

"Robert has his own bank account, as do I!" Heather breathlessly replied, her cheeks pink. "Besides, black looks good on me."

"And about everyone else!" retorted Harry with a snort. "And that will just be 'out' next season and then where will you be?"

"Still with a very pretty and nice Gucci bag," pouted Harry's guardian. For an older woman, nearing her fifties (Harry saw her driver's license on the kitchen counter that morning), Heather was still rather childish when it came to things. And Harry managed to find her weakness – designer handbags.

Rolling his eyes, he jerked his head in Remus's direction. He was now only a few feet from them and was eyeing Heather worriedly.

"Harry?" he asked.

Harry turned to face him and nodded. He stuck a hand out to shake. "Mr. Lupin, I presume?"

Remus quirked one side of his lips a bit into a smile, and reached out; the two wizards shook hands and then fell silent. Heather rolled her eyes and chirped, "Anyone want a smoothie or something?"

Harry nodded. "Shall I get a seat?"

"Sure," she replied, eyeing a smoothie bar. They were few and far in between in Rochester. The town was more aimed at tourists and not many were health-food lovers.

Harry and Remus found a four-person table in the food court and sat awkwardly and silently together. Then:

"What house are you—"

"How did you meet my par—"

They laughed.

"You first," offered Remus. Harry shook his head and motioned for Remus to start. He nodded. "What House are you in at Hogwarts?"

Harry sighed, rubbing his temples. That was becoming a very annoying question. "I'm not at Hogwarts."

Remus looked surprised. "What? Where are you then?"

"I'm at Wyckham," at Remus' blank look, Harry elaborated, "Wyckham Academy is fairly new, about five years old now. They offer a lot more classes than Hogwarts, which includes non-magical

classes. It's..." Harry frowned. Wyckham wasn't easy to explain and the course load was incredibly heavy compared to other schools.

He sighed. "Think about it like this: Hogwarts is the top-of-the-line wizard school, right? Okay, well Wyckham takes that a step further. There are advanced classes with accelerated learning curves. You learn faster and more in a short time. More is crammed into your head so you spend most of your time studying or playing in your clubs." Harry grimaced. "I'd hate to put it this way, but it's an elitist school. If you're good enough, you attend. If you don't, you go to Aberclythe or Hogwarts. Anyone wanting to transfer from those schools to Wyckham has to take summer courses to catch up on the workload."

Remus nodded. "I think I understand. Is it more of a prep school?"

"Yeah," nodded back Harry, liking the term better than his own 'elitist' one. "More classes mean more opportunities later and a better qualification for a job. More contacts too, as Nicholas Flamel and Matthew Blake are professors there."

Remus was suitably impressed. "I've heard of Flamel but not Blake."

Harry nodded. "He's our business and communications prof. I'm taking his introductory course this year so I can manage the Potter estate when I get older. He also started Blake Communications. Have you heard of them?"

Remus frowned in thought. "I think so; some colleagues of mine have dealings with a company he represents."

"Colleagues?" asked Harry. He didn't want to come out and say that Sirius thought Remus was unemployed; Harry felt a bit stupid for believing his godfather, considering Remus was wearing worn, but not cheap clothes. Even his appearance showed that he had enough money to take care of himself.

Remus nodded. "You know about werewolves and vampires, I take it?"

Harry opened his mouth to reply, when Heather appeared, plopping a tray down on the table top.

“Blueberry-Strawberry smoothie for me,” she sang, placing the large plastic cup by a vacant seat; “Mango-Kiwi-Raspberry for Harry... and I’m sorry, Remus, I didn’t know what you wanted, so I got you a Chocolate-Raspberry-Yoghurt blend. Is that okay? We can trade.”

Remus’ eyes lit up at the sight of the thick, dark chocolate and raspberry blend Heather handed to him. “Not a problem,” he replied, and then looked at the older woman as she slid into the seat next to Harry. “Obviously you know who I am, but I’m afraid that I am at a loss at who you are. You’re certainly not Harry’s aunt, Petunia Dursley.”

Remus was taken aback when both Heather and Harry scowled darkly.

“I’m Heather Woolworth,” said Heather, a bit cautiously with Remus’s admission to knowing what Petunia Dursley looked like. “I’m Harry’s official guardian.”

“Guardian!?” Remus’s mouth dropped open.

Harry frowned into his smoothie, chewing on the end of the straw. Heather glanced at him and gave a brief summary of the Dursley’s treatment of Harry and finally, his Headmistress’s intervention and the court case.

Remus was left gapping at the end. “I don’t believe it,” he was muttering.

“Sorry?” asked Harry, who was by now, half-way done his smoothie. Remus had barely touched his and Heather looked somewhere between smug and worried.

Remus ran a hand through his already messy hair (that was no competition for Harry’s own locks), and stared at Harry with a baleful gaze. “Dumbledore told me you’d be safe at the Dursleys, Harry.”

Heather groaned. "Not Dumbledore again."

Remus looked at her curiously, but then continued to Harry: "If I had known you were being mistreated in any way, I would've taken you out of that house. But the last time I checked in with Dumbledore about your condition was on your fourth birthday. Didn't you get my birthday gift? Dumbledore told me you were just fine, so I took the job I was offered. I'm beginning to regret it."

Harry shook his head. "What gifts? I never received anything when I was at the Dursleys. I had my first birthday party when I turned twelve with the Woolworth's!"

Remus paled and his hands opened and clenched reflexively. Heather reached across the table and patted Remus's hands comfortingly. "It's alright, dear," she said soothingly, "Dumbledore pulled the wool over all of our eyes."

Remus sighed. "I suppose when this is done I'll go to Hogwarts and have a few words with him."

Harry choked on his smoothie as a small piece of raspberry went the wrong way. Heather patted him on the back. "You don't know?!"

"Know what?" asked Remus, confused.

Heather took pity on the man. He was clearly out of the loop. "Dumbledore was forced to retire from his Headmaster position after he kidnapped Harry a few months ago. Harry brought it to his lawyers and won; Dumbledore is now working full-time for the Wizengamot."

Remus frowned. "I really need a newspaper," he mumbled to himself, running another hand through his hair. Harry was beginning to think he did that when incredibly stressed or confused.

The three sat in silence for a few minutes, before Harry gathered his courage and asked, "Before Heather came back, you mentioned something about werewolves and vampires?"

Remus nodded slowly, looking from Heather and Harry; Heather correctly interpreted the look and waved her hand at him saying, "Oh, I know about the wizard world, Remus – so don't worry about having to censor anything from me!"

Nodding, Remus took a deep breath and repeated, "Do you know about werewolves and vampires?"

"Of course," replied Harry, matter-of-factly. "We already studied them in Defense class, although Shacklebolt was quick to mention that there were several negative connotations relating to both. We did two theory classes, including signs of werewolves and vampires, their habits, life before and after, and then two practical classes on defense and useful healing spells to help werewolves and vampires."

"What?"

Harry nearly laughed at Remus's dumb-founded expression. It was like someone had told him the sky was blue but he believed for his entire life that it was neon pink. Harry bit the inside of his cheek and asked, "Did you really think that everyone has it in for werewolves and vampires?"

Remus nodded.

Harry shook his. "Wyckham isn't like normal schools, Remus. The professors try their best to make everyone look at both sides to everything and have us make up our own mind about items. We even study the Dark Arts once we hit our sixth year."

Remus still looked shell-shocked, so Heather reached out, picked up his half-finished smoothie and shook it in front of him.

"Drink, it'll help!" she beamed. Remus dutifully sipped from his straw several gulps and seemed to relax.

Harry waited until he put the smoothie down and asked softly, "You're a werewolf, right?"

Remus choked.

Harry sighed.

Heather patted Remus's hand again and pushed the neglected smoothie (again) toward the man.

Finally, after succeeding in calming Remus down and having Remus note that neither Heather nor Harry had got up and left the mall screaming in fear, Remus concluded that he didn't need to be afraid.

"Yes," Remus croaked out, grabbing the smoothie and slurping the last dregs. "I was infected when I was six."

Harry winced. "That's really young."

Remus nodded. "I know."

Heather sighed. "Obviously, you've handled it very well," she offered, "And you look very well, as well."

"Thank you," replied Remus, palming the empty plastic cup. "But I had a lot of help. First, your father and our friends, Peter and... Sirius... became Animagi for me. A werewolf can't hurt other animals... and then once your parents were killed, and Sirius was the traitor, and Peter dead... well, for a few years things were very bad. You were the only thing that kept me going."

"Oh?" asked Harry.

Remus smiled. It was the first Harry had seen on the man, and it transformed him. Years were melted off the lined and scarred face; the amber-coloured eyes of the man lit to a honey-brown and even his posture changed from a slouch to straight-back.

"I still remember when James placed you in my arms when you were born. I was... humbled to hold such a precious thing in my hands – hands that became paws of a killer for three nights a month. I promised then and there to do everything in my power to protect you as my own. And yet..." Remus trailed off, looking over Harry and Heather's shoulders. "I failed."

"You're here now," reminded Harry softly, sounding as wise as a thirteen year old could. "And that's what is important."

Remus offered Harry another shy, but brilliant smile; he then shook his head. "On your fourth birthday, or rather, a few days before, I was given a lucrative offer by my current employer. It's hard to believe it's almost been a decade with them!"

"Obviously, you were going somewhere with your werewolf and vampire spiel earlier," wryly inserted Harry.

Remus gave a very dry chuckle. "Yes," he answered. "Have you ever heard of the Syndicate? Or maybe EVAWOC?"

Harry shook his head. Maybe Blaise or Hermione had, or even Neville and Susan, but Harry was at a loss. He didn't do too much extra reading for Defense when he was already number one in the class.

Remus smiled. "I thought as much. The Syndicate isn't too well known."

"Syndicate makes me think of mafia," confessed Heather. She eyed Remus. "You're not involved in the Italian or Russian mafia, are you?"

"Pot calling the kettle black, Heather," laughed Harry, "considering Blaise's family has ties to the Italian mafia!"

Heather rolled her eyes. "Blaise and his side of the family are harmless. And Dumbledore exaggerates anything to get you on his side."

"Point," conceded Harry. Remus had followed the exchange like a tennis-ball match, but then cleared his throat. Heather and Harry's attention was back on him.

"The Syndicate isn't a crime organization," corrected Remus, "It's the official, short title for the EVAWOC. That stands for the European Vampire and Werewolf Outreach Community."

Harry blinked in surprise. “I’ve never heard of them. What do they do? And what do you do for them?”

Remus beamed. Harry found that he liked being on the receiving end of those smiles. “Bravo, Harry! You are a sharp one. I’m a liaison. My job is to travel the Continent looking for werewolf tribes and vampire strongholds and then make sure that they are being treated right. That they get enough food, aren’t coming to blows with the nearby population, that no one is actively hunting them except for the EVAWOC’s own Hunters – I’ll explain them later – and that, in general, the vampires and werewolf community is fine.”

Harry made a confused face. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up here. I was under the impression that Europe was completely against werewolves and vampires, that they’re hunted actively for being—” here he made quotation marks with his fingers —“dark creatures.”

Remus sighed. “Predominantly only in Britain and the smaller Eastern European countries is that the case. Mostly, and here you can ask Matthew Blake about this as he deals with the HBC1, vampires and werewolves live in harmony with their neighbours. Those neighbours might not realize that those night owls next door are vampires or that they have several large dogs as pets and come and go as they please... but no one really hunts them in France, Portugal, Germany, etc.”

“I’m so confused,” whined Harry. “I didn’t realize that the British government was so...”

“Archaic?”

Harry nodded. “So, who are these Hunters?”

“Specially hired and trained people who work closely with werewolves and vampires to find rogues. They track them down, and if possible, detain them. If not, they are allowed to... retire the subject.”

“Do they have to do that often?” asked Heather, completely engrossed.

Remus shook his head. "There were only six in the past two hundred years that the EVAWOC has been in existence. Which is amazing, considering that the vampire and werewolf community is near thirty thousand."

"Thirty-thousand!" Harry was shocked. "I didn't realize that there were that many werewolves and vampires in Europe!"

Remus nodded. "Most are in Russia, or the Baltic countries, but I know several who, despite their allergy to the sun, enjoy living in Spain year-round. You don't know how many times I've been to Barcelona and I've had to scold Sofia or Rodrigo when they've come to see me for sunscreen and aloe Vera lotion. I swear those two never learn!"

"They sound... harmless," said Harry.

Remus frowned. "Yes and no. They wouldn't go out of their way to harm someone, but if you were to hurt one of their families or threaten them, any werewolf or vampire would respond. We don't have too many idiots like that though, thank Merlin."

Heather nodded. "I'm very pleased to hear about an organization like EVAWOC. They're doing fine by me, and if you are employed there, clearly you're responsible and mature enough to handle dangerous situations."

"Well... yes," answered Remus, unsure of where Heather was going.

Heather smiled. "Great. Then Harry can tell you all about his first two years of school, Dumbledore's manipulations, and you're likely to handle the fact that Dumbledore blotched up the Potters' will and Sirius wasn't the secret keeper."

Harry wanted to smack Heather. "Way to be subtle!" he muttered to her.

The older woman shrugged, peering at Remus Lupin through her blue eyes. "Mr. Lupin? Remus? Are you all right?"

Remus struggled to find something to say. He settled on, "What?"

Harry sighed. "This might take some time..."

Blaise was speechless when Harry finished. "That's so cool!" he finally exclaimed. "I wonder if I could do something like that!"

Harry shrugged. "Probably. Although, I totally forgot to ask about Erik."

"Erik Münso?" asked Blaise. He nodded to himself, "He did say that he had some vampire blood in him. He would know about EVAWOC."

Blaise looked at Harry shrewdly. "By the way, speaking about Erik... you didn't come out to Denmark for the European Cup."

"Heather."

"Sorry?"

"I was still grounded, Blaise," sighed Harry. "She wrote a letter to Erik and his parents saying that I had got into serious trouble and was grounded until further notice, but thank you very much for thinking about Harry and his love for Quidditch; perhaps next year?"

Blaise winced. "Ouch, that sucks."

Harry nodded. "It was a touch August, but... I guess I deserved it for our stunt with Sirius. What if he really was the killer? The traitor? Even with our wands and skills, we wouldn't manage to hold him down."

"You've fought and won against Voldemort twice," pointed out Blaise, looking at Harry from his bed. He was on his side now. "I think you could manage a Death Eater, especially one that has been in Azkaban Merlin knows how many years."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. But I can't help but think that the first time was because Voldemort underestimated me, and the second time it was only a teenager version of him. He obviously didn't know as many spells as the first, and was quicker to anger. I have to be careful."

"That's an oxymoron."

"Sorry?" Harry glanced at Blaise, putting the album away.

"Harry Potter and being careful is impossible. Things just happen to you, and you just fly off half-cocked anyway," smirked Blaise.

Harry wagged a finger at him. "If I were Hermione, I'd have said language! already, but since I'm not, I'll just say that I'm learning to think before I act."

"Good luck!"

"I'll manage!"

"Sure."

Harry and Blaise glowered at each other for a bit, before bursting out into hearty laughs.

"Still," chuckled Blaise, calming down, "I said I'd get your back, Harry – don't forget it."

"I wouldn't," replied Blaise's best friend. Harry glanced at the bedside alarm clock and jumped up. "Well," he said, his mood much better, "it's nearly six thirty! We ought to get to the Café for dinner!"

Blaise grinned. "Right. Think any Yearlings are lost?"

Harry scoffed. "Please, there are nearly thirty second year students now, and only about twelve first years if I overheard Fanny Gunn correctly. She was complaining about the noise level of the library, and how she couldn't concentrate on her work."

Blaise stared. "School just began, what's she going on about?"

Harry shrugged. "I think she and Schmidt are working on a charms project together. It was probably something about needing a good thesis and stellar application to get her into the WizTech Corporation when she graduates next year."

Blaise harrumphed and reached for his runners. "Whatever. I doubt we'll be that uptight and anal about getting a good job when we're that age."

Harry laughed. "Want to make a bet on that?"

Blaise shuddered. "No thanks. You've got a golden touch when it comes to gambling and I distinctly remember a sour Draco when you collected your Quidditch winnings from him during the Junior League."

Harry merely grinned.

The rest of Harry's friends, with the exception of Dean, were already seated at their table when Harry and Blaise arrived in the Café. Several students greeted the two by name; Oliver Wood told Harry that the upcoming Wednesday would be Quidditch practice and then Thursday would be football practice for returning players.

By the time the two friends were seated, it was nearly quarter to seven and they had yet to get to the buffet to get food.

"We could always go to the kitchens afterward and ask Floppy for something," offered Blaise with a wag of his eyebrows.

"Cute," said Hermione sarcastically, rolling her eyes at Blaise's antics. "By the way, who are those two redheads with Fred and George?"

Harry turned to see who she was talking about; he spotted Fred and George at their normal table of the Pirates Quidditch teams, with two other redheads. One was a tall, gangly boy who was pulling at his

Wyckham black-and-blue striped tie with a scowl on his face, and the other was a redheaded girl who was staring at everything in the Café with some emotion Harry couldn't identify on her face. He knew who they were, though.

"The girl is Ginny Weasley, the one whom Dumbledore kidnapped me to rescue. The boy is Ron Weasley – remember him Hermione? In Flourish and Blott's last summer, he got all shirty about Nature's Nobility?"

Blaise laughed and Neville rolled his eyes. Susan ignored them in favour of her pudding, and Luna was still nowhere to be found; Dean was just returning with two plates.

"What I'd miss?" he asked as he sat, picking up his fork and spearing several pieces of broccoli.

"Weasleys," offered Susan offhandedly.

"Oh? What about them?" asked Dean.

"We've got two new ones in our midst," chuckled Blaise.

Hermione scowled. "I remember them, Harry. But I don't see why Ron was all uptight about your whole Duke thing, even after I explained it to him."

Neville wagged his spoon that dripped ice cream at Hermione. "It's pretty simple to explain Hermione. Despite the nobility in wizarding Britain, they have no real power. However, most old families like the Malfoys would defer their opinions to those of a higher rank – meaning Harry. Some wizards are bitter about it because nobility means a seat on the Wizengamot, but also it means the power to change things. It's also a reputation thing."

Hermione pursed her lips in thought, and everyone left her alone; she would usually get like that.

“Fred and George sent me a few letters this summer saying that Ron and Ginny would be coming,” offered Harry, “although they did warn me away from Ron – apparently he thinks coming here is my fault.”

“Well, you did tell their parents about Dumbledore,” Blaise pointed out, leaning back against the chair.

Harry shrugged. “They didn’t have to listen to me.”

Dean snorted. “Who wouldn’t listen to the Boy-Who-Lived?”

Harry scowled.

“Still,” Susan spoke up, “I’d feel a bit sorry for him. I mean, he had two years at Hogwarts; he probably had friends and now he has to come here, where he doesn’t know anyone and people already have their social groups.”

“With that face on though, he’ll have a much harder time making friends,” commented Neville quietly, looking down and finishing his dessert.

The group silently agreed; finally, Harry said, “Well, how about Blaise and I get some dinner from the kitchens and we tell you about Remus Lupin at the pond? It’s still light out until eight-ish.”

“Sounds good!” chirped Susan, standing and poking Hermione in the shoulder; the later was still staring out into space, thinking. It was a usual occurrence.

Harry and Blaise left the Café and entered the side door to the kitchens, greeting several house elves by name and then lavishing Floppy with compliments. The house elf bawled into his tea cozy, and then with the help of Mimzy and Gummy, gave the two teens a basket full of nibbly appetizers, the main course, and two bottles of root beer.

The two thanked the house elf profusely, and then slipped out the side door in the kitchen to the garage, walking behind the school building toward the back of the property.

For several hours, Harry and Blaise and their friends took turns talking about their summer, and then Harry explained about Remus Lupin and the EVAWOC.

“So where is he now? Does he know about Sirius being innocent?” asked Dean.

Harry shrugged. “He said he was leaving a week after we met for Croatia, and he didn’t know how long he’d be there. He said he’d send a letter and then at Christmas he’d meet with me and Sirius and they’d talk things out. Remus said he had to do some digging into my parents’ will and records before making any more judgments.”

“Sounds reasonable,” said Hermione, finally snapping out of her thoughts. “Do you think that he’ll believe you, though?”

“Maybe,” answered Harry. “I’m not too sure yet.”

The group continued to talk some more until the sky grew dusky and indigo. No one bothered the group as they entered the school building and made their way to the dorm wing.

On the second floor, Harry spotted Luna amongst the crowd of returning and new students heading to bed (most went to be between ten and midnight, depending on schoolwork and their age) or their rooms to chat with their dorm mates.

“Luna!” called Harry, waving the blonde over.

The wispy girl had grown over the summer since Harry’s birthday; she continued to wear her multi-coloured knee socks and added a non-magical Halloween headband to her collection. The plastic stars wobbled back and forth on their springs as she moved toward the group; every so often the stars would flash red and blue lights.

“Nice headband,” said Susan when Luna reached them.

Luna smiled. “Thank you. It’s quite eye-catching, isn’t it?”

“Quite,” dryly agreed Hermione. Harry poked her in her side and she scowled at him. “It looks nice Luna,” she finally said.

Luna nodded – almost regally – at Hermione in acceptance of the compliment.

“Are you going to your room, Luna?” asked Harry.

Luna answered, “Yes. But I was searching the corridor for magic termites.”

“Magic termites?” repeated Neville, looking over his shoulder in slight fear.

Luna nodded, her eyes slightly larger than normal when she elaborated on the termites. “They feed on magic instead of food.”

“There’s no such—OUCH!”

Blaise stepped on Hermione’s foot to shut her up. Although he wasn’t a fan of Luna’s himself, he knew that Harry had a soft spot for the girl and Hermione was more than capable of putting her foot in it when she spoke without thinking.

Luna and Harry’s attention was now on a blushing and glaring Hermione, who was staring at Blaise. “Sorry,” she mumbled, “I’m going to bed now. Night everyone.”

“Night Hermione,” the group chorused, and Susan apologetically waved goodbye, taking off down the hall after a steaming Hermione.

Harry sighed. He wished Hermione would just let the whole what-is-real/what-isn’t-real thing go. Luna was a barrel of laughs when she got weird.

Dean and Neville soon decided to head back to their dorm room, stating they would see the two in the morning; Harry and Blaise walked Luna to her room, making sure everyone knew that Harry enjoyed Luna’s company. By tomorrow, it would be over the school that Luna and Harry were friends.

“Let me know if your roommates do anything this year,” said Harry as Luna opened her bedroom door. She nodded and smiled wishfully.

“Goodnight Duke, Blaise,” she said.

“Night, Luna,” the boys chorused. Blaise then turned to Harry, and with a raised eyebrow asked, “Dorm?”

Harry nodded and soon they were walking down the hallway, nearing their bedroom. When they passed the bathroom, they saw that Steven Cornfoot and Wayne Hopkins were giving Ron Weasley a tour of the dorm floor. The three were standing near the boys’ dorm room, which was next to Blaise and Harry’s, and explaining to a confused Ron that there was no curfew.

“But that doesn’t make sense! Students could wander up and down the hallways at all hours!” protested Ron, clearly confused by the expression on his face.

“Ron,” began Steven patiently, “The house elves work at the kitchens almost all the time, so if there is no curfew, you could go down there whenever you’re hungry.”

“But what about security?” asked Ron.

Wayne laughed. “Wyckham is incredibly secure. It’s near impossible to fool the wards and non-magical security devices around the school. And when you’re inside, you’re more than safe.”

“Hey!” called out Blaise. The three turned and Wayne waved in greeting.

“How’s it going, Blaise? Harry?” the American asked.

Blaise grinned. “Fine... yourself Wayne? Ready to get your arse handed to you on Wednesday evening?”

Wayne laughed. “Not a chance, Pirate. We Monsters will kick your ass in practice.”

“We’ll see,” grinned a gleeful Blaise. “Hasn’t happened yet!”

Steven rolled his eyes. At Ron’s look, he offered, “We have several Quidditch teams. Feel free to try out for any of them, since they need reserves. Quidditch and football are pretty big here.”

“Oh,” the redhead said, feeling awkward and shuffling his feet.

Harry took pity on him, and did his best to ease any concerns he might have, despite the redhead’s blatant dislike for him. “Look, don’t worry about security or anything – just enjoy the atmosphere and you’ll fall into a routine soon enough. Is there anyone you know here besides your brothers and sister?”

Ron turned his glare on Harry, who mentally groaned. “What’s it to you?”

At the sudden aggressive tone, Steven and Wayne gapped at the newcomer. “Crikey, Ron, what’s gotten into you?” asked Wayne. “Harry was only asking a question!”

“He’s just another Pureblood upstart that thinks he’s better than everyone else!” hotly replied Ron.

Blaise took a menacing step forward, making Ron shuffle back; Harry grabbed his friends’ sleeve to stop him. Steven intervened. “Ron, Harry’s not at all like that. I don’t know where you got that rubbish in your head from, but snap out of it and fast – most here won’t stand for talk like that! Even the Headmistress will severely reprimand you if you bully or snark at another student. There’s zero tolerance for that behaviour here.”

Ron’s anger seemed to spark and then deflate; he just nodded at Steven, scowled at Blaise and Harry, and then muttered, “I’m going to my room.”

The four watched him stalk down the corridor and then enter a room that had previously been unoccupied; the seventh year who had that room had graduated the previous year.

“He’s going to get it rough,” murmured Steven. Blaise nodded and Harry mentally agreed.

“Is there anyone else from Hogwarts here in our year to help him?” asked Blaise.

Wayne nodded. “There’s a Justin Finch-Fletchley apparently. Was one of the students petrified last year, so his parents freaked out and sent him here instead. Rumour mill has it that he had to fight his parents to stay in the magical world.”

Harry grimaced. “Poor bloke. I guess that means then that Ernie still has his own room?”

At Steven’s nod, Wayne sighed wistfully. “That lucky asshole.”

“Oy!”

Wayne turned to his friend. “Of course I still love you, Steve, but even you have to understand that there is only so much I can do to put up with your snoring.”

Harry and Blaise snickered as the two friends walked off; they were arguing about who snored the loudest and who performed the best silencing spells.

Blaise opened their door, and kicked his shoes off. “Mario’s a first year here too.”

“He’ll be fine and he knows he can come to us if there are any problems. I’ll make sure Colin looks after him too.”

Blaise nodded gratefully at Harry, “Thanks mate.”

“No problem,” replied Harry, getting his pajamas out of the dresser. “That Weasley is going to cause some problems, isn’t he?”

“Maybe,” answered Blaise, grabbing his tooth brush and slipping on his slippers. “But he’ll grow up soon enough.”

“Hopefully,” replied Harry dubiously, as Blaise closed the door behind him. Harry suddenly thought that his school year wouldn’t be any easier than the previous two.

“And here I was,” he muttered to the empty room, “thinking that I would have a fun year. Ah well... all in the day and life of Harry bloody Potter.”

1: Heart and Blood Company; mainly used for blood donations, owned by a Vampire family.

AN:(April.04.07) Yay! Four exams done, one left on April 19th and I am done my third year of University! That’s a scary thought...

SO! Sorry for being AWOL recently, but school will always come first. Expect numerous chapter updates, if I can pull it off. The 19th is another exam (Satire! Woo/sarcasm) and then... you will hate me... as I leave for a three-week vacation to Thailand on the 25th. However, there is Internet at all three resorts I’m staying at, and the last two weeks are spent on Phuket and another small island, so I should be able to relax and write on paper some hard-copy chapters.

I hope this chapter was enough for those who have been eagerly anticipating it. Let me know what you think! Also: on my Yahoo!Group there is a companion guide titled Nature’s Nobility. It currently has only the Potter section written, but there will be more to come. There are barely any spoilers in there.

Lastly: regarding Nine Lives. I am crap at creatively killing someone. So, all of you who read Nine Lives as well as Wyckham, feel free to send PMs or leave in your reviews creative ways to kill off Death Eaters.

Cheers! Kneazle

Chapter Twenty

The first class of third year happened to be three hours with Flamel in potions. However, as they weren't making a time-based, nor flammable and sensitive potion for that class, things were easy-going and at nine-thirty were allowed a break to go to the Café for snacks – as long as they were back fifteen minutes later to continue with the Dragon-Pox cure.

The potions classroom was bright and airy; located in the western wing of the school, the potions classroom was painted a calm and tranquil sky blue. There were several posters on the wall, one of the periodic table of elements and how it could be applied to potions.

Each work station was a four-foot long table of light wood and alloy. A Bunsen burner was at each table, with a regulated knob to set the temperature for a more accurate heat source. Glass beakers and stirring rods were always cleaned with distilled water swabs before any potions class by the students.

Harry and Blaise settled at their usual table, near the back and by the door. They dropped their bags behind them, against the wall and out of the way in case they needed to run either to the front of the class for more supplies, or in case they needed to duck.

Blaise and Harry were a good team; they anticipated each others' moves and knew what they did best. Harry preferred chopping and handling the knife while Blaise enjoyed the repetitive movements of stirring and painstaking patience for measuring exact items.

Because they worked well together, they more often than not finished earlier than others in the class, but not by much. Harry, in particular, was able to grasp the theory and reasoning of a potion much better than Blaise, who was more than happy to sit back and let Harry... experiment.

Experimentation was not officially sanctioned for those under sixth year; however, Harry's ability in potions gave him slightly more leeway. The fact that he was the Boy-Who-Lived had nothing to do

with Flamel's decision in allowing Harry to experiment with quantity and ingredients.

To Ron Weasley, however, this seemed like favouritism. And since Ron Weasley was already feeling out of sorts being away from his friends at Hogwarts, seeing Harry "goof" made him incredibly cranky on the first day of class.

While the rest of the class spoke casually about what ingredient was needed next for their steps in the potion, or joked with the professor if they made a mistake, no one noticed Harry's contemplative look and Blaise's brief look of annoyance and slight terror. Harry was, after all, the one who wanted to sneak at two am in their first year to the lab; they ended up melting a cauldron, causing it to explode into hundreds of sharp pieces. Both Blaise and Harry had been lucky enough to duck and escaped unscathed, although, not without gossip the next morning and a weeks' worth of five-page essays to write.

The creation of the Dragon-Pox cure included 1.5cm of dragon's blood, and not a centimetre more. The page from Blaise's Intermediate Potions & Poisons was very adamant about the amount to be added, and when it should to be added. However, Harry had different ideas.

"Why not add it at the end?" he asked Blaise, stopping him when Blaise reached for the provided glass cup of the blood. "And use 2cm?"

"Why?" replied Blaise, waiting for Harry's answer. Sometimes they were right, and other times his guesses were wrong.

Ron Weasley, who had partnered with Steven Cornfoot, (who did so in an effort to help ease him into life at Wyckham) overheard Blaise and Harry at the next station over. He scowled, and clumsily dumped in several newts' eyes.

"Careful!" gasped Steven, furiously skipping ahead a few steps to counteract the volatile ingredients. While not causing an explosion, the potion would turn a nasty, stringy blue instead of syrupy red it was suppose to be.

Harry didn't notice the commotion beside him; he was going over the ingredients of the potion and the steps, silently mouthing the words as he read them, then tapped a single step.

"Dragons' blood is fairly reactive, but it's also heavy and more iron-based, due to the protein that comes from the food dragons eat. They are carnivores," said Harry slowly. "The rest of the potion is... like candy. We added two spoonfuls of sugar for the flavour, and mainly sweet herbs of various amounts. Without the dragons' blood, the potion is just a prescription-strength Tums and Hals."

"Your point being?" asked Blaise with a drawl. He only cared about enough theory to pass him in the course.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Adding the dragons' blood last is like a non-magical flu shot, nitwit. You add a little of the disease in with the medicine and vaccine so the body develops a resistance. Putting the dragons' blood last and upping the dosage of it will make it more potent." Harry frowned. "Theoretically, if it works."

Flamel had chosen that time to make his circuit around the room and had heard Harry's explanation. He stood in front of their station, silently, with his arms crossed and a bemused expression on his face.

Harry, slightly confused, looked up at his professor. Without saying anything, Flamel nodded and Harry shrugged.

Blaise sighed and reached around his neck for the plastic goggles Wyckham hoped students would use, and settled them around his eyes. Harry copied, and the two continued with the rest of the ingredients without the dragons' blood. By the time they added everything, Harry nodded at Blaise. The Italian exasperatedly sighed but poured the carefully measured 2cm worth of dragons' blood into the small cauldron on the Bunsen burner.

Harry was taking down notes, watching the potion froth and bubble. Blaise had settled back, slightly away from the cauldron and had his wand out in case things went wrong. Flamel however, was still standing there, watching.

The potion turned the appropriate thick red colour it was suppose to be after a few tense seconds.

Both Harry and Blaise sighed in relief. Had Harry's hypothesis failed (as it had numerous times in the past), both boys would come back that evening and do the potion by themselves, and Harry would have a week to hand in a detailed scientific report about what he thought he would do, how it would work, and they why it didn't. If he didn't know, it was acceptable, but Harry would usually find out through trial and error why one ingredient didn't work well with another.

"Congratulations, Harry," rumbled Flamel, in his deep voice. "It seems you've correctly proven yourself. By changing the amount of dragons' blood and adding it at the end, you've done what most Healers would do when handling an expensive and delicate ingredient. You've also figured out how Healers manage to make so many batches of Dragon-Pox relief."

When the professor stopped, Harry tentatively offered, "It cuts the time in half saving the blood for last, since it needs to consolidate with the other ingredients?"

"Correct," answered Flamel, smiling at the pair. "But I still want a report on your hypothesis and why it worked with detail for next Monday, Harry. Good work, Blaise."

"Thanks, Professor," replied Blaise, who flashed a wide smile of even, white teeth.

"Yes, Professor," replied the thirteen-year-old, while Blaise smirked at him once Flamel's back was turned. Blaise never had to do any extra work in potions.

Ron's temper had reached boiling point. Flamel's casual acceptance of Harry and Blaise's fooling around made Ron angry; he would never be able to do anything like that because he didn't understand the material, nor had Snape even considered something so sacrilegious of ruining a potion for fun back at Hogwarts.

Jealous and angry, Ron sneered at the two from beside Steven, who merely rolled his eyes. "Teacher's pets, much?" scowled Ron.

Harry, who let Blaise bottle the potion, turned and raised an eyebrow at Ron. "We can't help it if we're smarter than you."

Ron gapped, his ear tips turning a near magenta; a heavy red flush then rose from the collar of his shirt to his cheeks.

Blaise sniggered and Harry smirked. Blaise stopped the potion and cast an unbreakable charm on the glass vial. Hermione, with Susan in front of Harry and Blaise, turned and glared at the two. They both stopped with their joking and fell silent; although bossy, Hermione was damn scary when she wanted to be.

As soon as the clock struck 11, Blaise and Harry left. They had cleaned their utensils, finished their report on the potion, and had handed it in to Flamel.

"Ah, two hour break before three hours with Shacklebolt this afternoon," breathed Blaise happily. "Two hours of lunch!"

"More like two hours of reading, since we know Shacklebolt is going to quiz us on material we learned last year," argued Harry with a knowing smile. Blaise scowled.

"Ruin my fun!"

"Hardly," dryly replied the ebony-haired teen. "I'm being realistic. Besides, I have to learn as much as I can, don't I?"

Blaise frowned at the remark; it appeared that Harry's destiny wasn't too far from his mind.

Blaise kept silent as the two entered the Café, their defence book *So You Wanna Cast Advanced Spells* open in front of them. Blaise couldn't read the words on his page though; he kept glancing up at Harry, who sat next to him.

Harry was his best mate, and Blaise had meant it when he said he'd be right there behind Harry, watching his back when the worst would happen. It was his duty, and more importantly, his pleasure to help Harry. Growing up, Blaise had been constantly surrounded by his cousins and his little brother and sister. However, his little siblings were doted upon by his mother and father, and his cousins were all years older than him. Despite what Harry thought, having a large family did not necessarily mean that everyone spent equal time together or made sure everyone was happy.

Blaise had been slightly ignored; he was too old for the bambini of the family and yet too young for the older cousins. Stuck in the middle was no fun place to be, and so he had to make due with what he could. But in attending Wyckham and meeting Harry, someone his own age but also someone who ended up attaching themselves to Blaise made the Italian warm and fuzzy inside.

It wasn't a matter of possession and material items – just that Harry was his friend, his best mate. Harry was the one that went to Blaise when he had a bad nightmare of his times back at the Dursleys, or when he got a headache, or found a new spell or potion to try out. Harry went to Blaise – not Hermione, Neville or Hartz or even his guardians Robert and Holly. He told Blaise first, included Blaise in everything before anyone else. Blaise was Harry's confidant, partner in crime, best friend... Blaise was Harry's brother in everything but blood.

Having someone who relied on you, like Harry did to Blaise, made Blaise feel wanted and special and suddenly that awkward middle age of being too old and too young melted away into nothing.

Blaise was also under no illusion that Harry truly needed Blaise. Harry was forced to grow up far too soon in an unforgiving household and was independent. However, he was curbing that nature to please his guardians, and so far it seemed to be working. He would act a little more his age and less like a grown-up in a child's body.

The prophecy still hung over Harry like a dark cloud, but Blaise was confident his friend could handle it. Especially with Blaise by his side – Blaise wouldn't let anything happen to his friend.

Blaise's chin took on a stubborn tilt, lifting slightly into the air as he mentally pledged that he would do everything he could to help his friend in his destiny – whatever that may be.

The rest of the first week in September went by quickly; Harry fell back in love with history as it became a modern history, and his parents' role in the first war was briefly touched upon. He wasn't too sure how he felt about his parents being discussed so candidly in front of his classmates, but he felt somewhat closer to the Potters than before, having known little about them.

Unfortunately, his schedule didn't allow for him to continue history into his third year. Professor Lenoir was engaging and eccentric, wiry and old with a shock of white hair, and an excellent lecturer. Harry had been one of the best in the class, and the man had shown disappointment in Harry's lack of continuation.

However, Harry was taking numerous interesting courses, regardless of what he could and couldn't take. Tuesday was the first day of his politics class, with professor Worthington. Out of his friends, Blaise and Neville were joining him. Walking into the West classroom near the library doors, Harry saw only two others in the small class: Wayne Hopkins and the only girl, Su Li.

Worthington was fairly young by wizard standards, in his mid-forties, with salt-and-pepper hair and steely grey eyes. He began the class with roll call, and then got down to business, handing out the year syllabus.

"Since there are only five of you in this class, we will work closely together as a team, and at the end of the year you can present a detailed individual project on a case we'll briefly discuss." The man paused, his eyes sweeping across the five.

Blaise sat in the individual desk behind Harry; Neville sat next to Harry, and Wayne and Su sat slightly away from the two. Su sat near

the door and Wayne near the windows. Harry and his friends were directly in the middle.

“We will begin this class with two infamous trials, which,” here the professor looked slightly uncomfortable, his eyes landing on Harry and Neville, “deal indirectly with two of our own students.”

Neville paled considerably, making Harry turn to his friend in worry. Blaise leaned forward and patted Neville consolingly on the shoulder. It seemed the purebloods knew what was coming, whereas Harry and Wayne had no clue.

Worthington cleared his throat noisily and settled behind his desk, as if having a physical barrier would help distance himself from the curriculum.

“Near midnight on November third in 1981, several Death Eaters apparated to the Longbottom manor in Cork. They were Bellatrix Lestrange, Rudolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange and Barty Crouch Junior. They broke through the heavily wards placed there by the Aurors and Albus Dumbledore.

“Alice Longbottom hid her son and then proceeded to join her husband against the Death Eaters. Both she and her husband lost their wands at one point and were tortured under the Cruciatus curse for nearly thirty minutes before Aurors noticed an irregularity in the wards. By that time, both Alice and Frank Longbottom were what Healers classify as insane.” The professor took a deep breath, gave a single, pained look at Neville, and continued.

“The four Death Eaters who were there that night were taken into custody, and did not do anything to deny their allegiance to Voldemort. During their closed (to the public) trial the next day, each Death Eater went to the stand and did nothing to defend themselves, eager to be placed into Azkaban Prison for their role in supporting Voldemort. They did not deny what they did to the Longbottoms, nor did they offer any explanations. After several fruitless hours of trying to force testimonies from them, Veritaserum was finally used and several other, previously unknown and unsolved crimes were

admitted. These include several unsolved murders, three rape charges, arson and vandalism.

“On November sixth, the Lestranges and Crouch Junior were sent to Azkaban, where they remain today, in the high security ward.”

Worthington looked winded and sick. It was obvious by his fast-paced speech and slight widening of the eyes that politics was something he greatly enjoyed and argued against or for, depending on the cause. The trials were a pet project, it seemed to Harry; something that Worthington invested much time and effort into learning everything about. Harry had yet to see why. He supposed that he'd learn the reason soon enough, and continued to listen carefully. He would not take notes.

Worthington's eyes darted to Harry, and the teen stiffened. A feeling of dread crept up his spine, and his felt chilled. Things were suddenly falling into place.

“One of the best known criminal cases of 1981 is that of Sirius Black.”

Harry's back stiffened and he forcibly made himself relax. It would not do for people to correctly assume that he already knew about Sirius – or worse, think that they had contact.

Worthington was working up to a rant, as he began to pace the front of the classroom to the surprise of his students. “Unfortunately, Sirius Black was never given a trial. He was thrown into Azkaban Prison, located near the Orkney Islands in Northern Scotland, straight away. The man who was in charge of Black's would-be-trial was a man by the name of Bartemius Crouch, the senior. Currently, he is the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation at the Ministry of Magic.

“He fell from his position in the DMLE when his son was revealed to be one of those behind the Longbottom torture. Crouch was well-known for his authorization of Unforgivable Curses to be used on Death Eaters and suspect Death Eaters during Voldemort's Rise of Terror in the 1970s, as it is called.” Worthington took a deep breath and Harry and Blaise shared a look.

“What is known about Sirius Black is mostly hearsay because the Aurors first on the scene decided to ignore proper procedure and Obliviated all the witnesses who were out on the street that afternoon,” stated Worthington.

Harry immediately took notice that Worthington said “on the street,” which meant that it was possible that a few non-magical folks had escaped the Memory Charms, as could happen when there were large incidents. If someone had escaped, that meant that they could possibly prove that Sirius was innocent! Harry filed the thought away with his basic Occlumency shields to ponder later when not in class.

“Twelve people were killed, excluding Peter Pettigrew. As the largest piece of him found was a finger, the DMLE decided to call off any investigations with a prime suspect in their custody and the assumption that he blew up Pettigrew.”

The classroom fell silent. At first, Su and Wayne had been taking notes. However, as soon as it became obvious that the first cases spoken about would be directly involving their classmates, they abandoned their pencils and paper.

However, Su raised her hand and Worthington nodded at her. “But sir,” she began, in her soft voice, “what spell had Black cast that would... explode a person?”

Worthington smiled at the Asian girl. “Good work, Miss Li – you noticed the first flaw in the case. There is no known spell, with the exception of reducto and bombarda that cause things to explode. And those are used primarily with inanimate objects. While you can cast them on a person, the effect is nowhere near strong enough to explode a person so that there is no trace of them.”

The professor looked around the room. “Potter! Perfect example, get up here for a moment.”

Frowning, and a little weary, Harry rose from his desk and walked to the front, fingering his wand edgily. Worthington smiled at Harry and

said in comfort, “No worries, Harry, I just need you to cast reducto on the ballistics gel human I’ll conjure.”

Harry nodded, and Worthington waved his wand, a tight frown on his face. Conjuring was a fairly exact charm and transfiguration hybrid. A witch or wizard had to know exactly what was involved in all part of whatever they wanted to conjure to make it work.

With a slight sparkle and dull whoosh sound, a slightly see-through, dirty coloured yellow anatomically correct human torso sat on the professor’s desk.

“Cast reducto on the torso, Potter.”

With a shrug, Harry raised his wand to the height of his chest, and said in a strong, clear voice, “Reducto!”

The jet of light hit the chest directly, and the ballistics gel torso went flying. It hit the wall with a loud thud and wobbled before falling face-first to the floor.

Worthington twitched his wand and the body rose. The class could see that there was a noticeable dent in the chest, enough to collapse it and cause serious damage to the lungs, sternum and ribs... but with proper and quick magical medical help, the witch or wizard would live. They would not, however, blow up.

“As Potter demonstrated, a reducto would not cause a body to spontaneously combust. In case you are wondering as well, I asked Potter to demonstrate because he has the strongest magical spell strength in your year and would effectively show what a well-aimed reducto could do.” Worthington nodded in thanks to the teenager, who sat back down at his desk.

“Wouldn’t there also be a lot of blood and gore?” asked Wayne.

Worthington nodded. “Yes... a lot more. The majority of the wounds that those around Pettigrew’s location received were massive head trauma (such as bruising of the brain, fractured cranium pieces that

pierced the brain), third degree burns, internal bleeding, and numerous broken bones. Other injuries were from flying debris and the body going into shock.”

“What about Priori Incantato?” asked Neville. “Wasn’t it used on Black’s wand?”

“No,” said Worthington, shaking his head. “It was assumed that he cast the spell, stood there laughing like a maniac and that was that. Of course, just before he was incarcerated, his wand was tested and the previous spell had been that of a point-me.”

“So,” Harry spoke up, hesitantly, “do you think it’s possible that Pettigrew may still be alive?”

Worthington frowned, and rubbed his clean-shaven chin. “There is no proof that Pettigrew is either dead or alive,” the professor finally said, deliberately slowly with conscious thought. “He is legally declared dead, but there was no real evidence of his death. If he had escaped the explosion, he would have had to apparate, had a port-key activated for a trigger word, or he was an illegal animagus. Those are the only options available to support your question, Potter.”

Harry nodded, and began thinking about the questions he could ask Sirius at the later date.

“Anyway, those are the two main cases we’ll begin with on Thursday, so take your books with you and read over the case notes. We’ll discuss the precedent set by both cases and the consequences of the trials or the no-trial as well, so come prepared to answer questions in detail about the case,” finished Worthington, just as the bell rang signalling the end of class.

Harry gathered his text book for politics and shoved it in his bag, alongside Neville and Blaise.

“Did you want to go over the notes after dinner?” offered Neville, as Harry and Blaise were joined by Su and Wayne as well.

Harry shook his head. "Oliver's schedule a meet for the Quidditch team so Blaise and I won't be able to get together after dinner. Before, or now, would be good though."

Wayne nodded and Su said, "Sounds like a plan. The Commons?"

The group of five together walked to the Commons, and found a table where they could sit together and reread the case notes.

Half-way through their study session, Ron Weasley and his younger sister came through the open double-doorway. Ron shot Harry and Blaise a dirty look, whereas Ginny Weasley seemed to hunch in on herself. She trotted after her brother and took a pair of armchairs near a window in the corner of the room, far away from the Boy-Who-Lived.

"I don't mean to pry," began Wayne in his southern American-drawl, "but what is up with you and Weasley?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I saved his sister last year—"

"Yes, Harry, everyone here knows about the Chamber of Secrets," interrupted Su with a roll of her eyes.

Harry rolled his own eyes in reply. "Fine. We also met before the school year started at Flourish and Blott's. Draco Malfoy happened to be there with us as well, and apparently there is some... issues between the two of them. Weasley thought that since we were friends with Malfoy, we were obviously falling into the 'purebloods must rule the world' lot as the rest of those at Hogwarts."

Wayne winced. "And since then...?"

"Since then he's tried making Harry's life a living hell," finished Blaise crisply. "Thinks Harry is the teacher's pet, uses his Boy-Who-Lived title to get what he wants, yadda, yadda, yadda."

Su and Wayne shared disappointed looks and a scowl. "He should know that you're not like that, though," Su finally said, looking at Harry over the large, shiny hardcover text.

“He doesn’t know me,” replied Harry evenly, finally looking up from his text and meeting Su’s gaze. She sat back in her chair when Harry’s emerald eyes bore into hers. “And he never will know me.”

Su sighed and Wayne turned a page, while Blaise scribbled down another note. A glance at his watch told him it was nearly five-thirty. “We ought to get back to the dorm and freshen up for dinner.”

Su and Wayne said goodbye to Harry and Blaise, who left the Commons without looking at the two Weasley siblings.

“By the way,” said Blaise as the wove between numerous students of other years, a few who waved at the two, “what ever happened between you and Arthur Weasley when you brought the girl Weasley back home?”

Harry hiked his shoulder bag further up on his shoulder to get a better grip and undid the two top buttons of his Oxford shirt under his tie.

“Not much,” the teen revealed. “Molly Weasley, their mother, took Ginny away to her room I suppose, and the two older siblings stuck around with their father while I told them how I ended up at Hogwarts and my conversation with Dumbledore in the mirror. Of course, they were dully surprised and immediately the eldest, Bill, went to Gringott’s to put a stop to the automatic deduction for Hogwarts tuition.”

“And?” asked Blaise, opening their dorm room. Harry sighed as he sank down on his bed, toeing his shoes off in the process. His bag fell to the floor with a loud thump.

“And,” echoed Harry with a slight drawl, “I told them to contact Hartz and that she’d set them up with a Flamel Scholarship and the necessary papers. When they contacted her, I came back here through the Floo.” He shuddered. “I hate the Floo.”

“That was it?” asked Blaise, opening a drawer and pulling out a pair of jeans and a sweater. “Nothing more? You didn’t speak with the girl Weasley after that?”

“No,” replied Harry, sitting up. “I didn’t see her again until school began.”

“Hmm,” answered Blaise, with a tiny shrug. “Anyway!” he exclaimed, tossing his sweater at Harry. “No rest for the wicked – get up, you bum, and take a shower. You stink!”

“I’ll stink more tonight after practice, but fine,” conceded Harry with a laugh and gallant bow. “Whatever Sir Blaise demands.”

“Sir Blaise,” muttered Blaise quietly, with a smirk. “Sounds good. Care to entrust any estates you have to me, then, Duke?”

“Oh, bite me!” came the classy reply as Harry walked out of the dorm room.

As the first week of classes came to a close, the clubs and team showcase would begin that Saturday and Quidditch and other spots that were made vacant by graduating students or those who dropped the game became open. Blaise had joined the Tennis team in his first year, but had not gone to any of the meetings, and was therefore dropped from the roster.

This year, however, Blaise happily joined again, and this time went to the meeting.

“Are you playing doubles or singles?” Hermione asked later that day, after coming back from the stables. She smelled strongly of horse.

“Doubles, which I prefer, but they want me practicing in singles for now with the captain,” replied Blaise proudly.

“But that doesn’t help you with learning your partner’s quirks while playing,” stated Hermione pointedly, while Susan, beside her, hung her head and shook it.

As Blaise and Hermione began to argue, Harry walked away, and found Luna near one of the tables in the gym. She was staring at the

sign that said: Become a Thespian! Embrace your inner Shakespeare!

"Planning on joining the drama club?" asked Harry, coming up behind her.

Luna didn't jump; she merely turned her head and said, "Hello Duke! Possibly. I think I would make a fabulous Puck."

"Err... Luna," hesitantly began Harry, "you realize Puck is traditionally played by a man?"

She turned her head up to look at Harry with a blatant so? look on her face. Harry sighed. It wasn't worth it. "What other clubs have you signed up for?"

Luna brightened, and together they walked towards the gym exit. "I joined the drama club, the philosophy club, and the debate club."

Harry felt a headache come upon him. "Debate?" he echoed faintly.

"Yes! I think I can add to the club's atmosphere," replied Luna dreamily.

"That I don't doubt," laughed Harry slightly. Mentally, he made a note to warn Hermione about Luna's joining of her previous debate club.

Then, as Luna began to hum a familiar, catchy tune, Harry thought, Nah. Let Hermione find out for herself. But that's one debate I would pay good money to watch! A wicked grin spread across his face, and he found himself joining in on Luna's quirky and off-tune rendition of Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head, right to the Café, passing Flamel on the way.

The Alchemist shot Harry and Luna a strange look, but shook his head and continued walking down the hallway; Harry and Luna began to laugh until Harry's side hurt.

When they entered the Café, Luna went off to one of her tables, and Harry went to the Marauder's. Fred and George met him half-way there and followed Luna's path with their eyes.

"You don't want to know," Harry cautioned.

The Twins grinned. Together they answered: "Of course not, Duke."

Harry groaned. He was never going to get rid of that blasted nickname.

AN: (May.27.07) I'm so sorry for the long delay – I was on vacation 'til last Thursday, the 18th, and I celebrated my 21st birthday on Wednesday and had my party on Friday. So, yay, I'm 21! I got into the summer course I wanted so I can graduate from Uni in June, 2008, and I'm currently job searching... I want to go to NYC in July to see Jasper Fforde and get his next Thursday Next novel signed!

As for this chapter, again, I think hardly my best due to my ex-boyfriend being a dick at my birthday party ("oh, of course I still care for you, but I'm going to tell you I got two phone numbers.") and our above-ground pool of seventeen years finally collapsing and breaking on us. Ouch!

Is anyone reading this going to Prophecy in August? It's held in Toronto, so if any of you want to meet up, let me know – I won't be going myself, but it's in the home city, so :-D

Also – finally – who here watches BBC's Robin Hood?!?! Isn't it amazing?? I love it. And Harry Lloyd (a.k.a. Will Scarlett), but that's another matter altogether. Excuse me, as for the Robin Hood thing, there is a reason, as you might learn soon enough :-D

Cheers! Kneazle

PS: May 28, 2007 -- thanks for the note on 'distilled water' versus alcoholic swabs. I suppose this just goes to show I am VERY CLEARLY an English major and not in sciences :(

Chapter Twenty-One

September faded away and October blew in with an early chill. Kingsley Shacklebolt thought it a good idea to see how his third year students had progressed over the years – as some were able to handle powerful fourth year spells and a handful were dabbling in fifth year spells.

The sky was dark, with a threat of a heavy downpour in the late evening and a strong, chilly breeze swept across the Wyckham grounds.

Shacklebolt had enlisted the help of charms professor Schmidt and transfiguration professor Klein to create a rectangular duelling platform. However, the difference between this duelling platform and the standard duelling platforms found in the League was that the platform Shacklebolt designed had numerous arms branching off from the main platform.

One arm was made of squishy material similar to what Harry thought could be found in a blown-up fun house, and another arm was almost completely separated from the original platform by a three-foot high brick wall.

“Slightly like an obstacle course, but you won’t have to do one of those for another few months,” commented Kingsley Shacklebolt happily. He clapped his hands once and grinned, his teeth ivory against his skin. “Who’s first?”

Even Harry warily looked at the platform and took a step back to avoid being picked out.

Shacklebolt looked put out for a bit before he sighed. “All right, I suppose I’ll go over the rules of this duelling competition first.”

“Yeah, that would be a good idea,” muttered Blaise from beside Harry, darkly.

Harry suppressed a smirk. Shacklebolt looked a wee bit too excited for Harry’s tastes anyway.

“Right! So, first; no harmful spells. You’re here to show creative use of spells that will knock someone unconscious or disarm them.

“Second; have fun! Feel free to use the obstacles on the duelling platform to your advantage. You don’t need to stand still.

“Which brings me to rule three; in a real fight, you won’t be facing your opponent waiting for them to bow. You’re going to be at it left, right and centre – which is what I want you to do here. No bowing, no shaking hands. I say ‘go’ and you go.”

The class was silent. Shacklebolt looked around and puffed his chest out a bit and said, “Well, then – who’s ready?”

Harry actually cringed. It was one thing fighting against Voldemort or battling giant basilisks, but it was another duelling for sport. Despite being top of the class, Harry wasn’t too interested in duelling for fun.

Shacklebolt sighed. “Well, we’ll go alphabetically then.” He picked up his ever-handy clipboard and skimmed the names. “Since Weasley and Finch-Fletchley just transferred this year, we’ll have them duel together. However, you two can just take a seat and watch for now.”

Ron, who was slightly embarrassed at being singled out for lacking the necessary ability to compete with the other third years, moodily shuffled to the professor’s side and sprawled on the grass, wrapping his second-hand winter jacket tighter around him. Justin followed at a more sedated pace.

“For the rest of you, we’ll have in this order: Bones versus Zabini; Cornfoot versus Turpin; Granger versus Thomas; Hopkins versus Potter; and Li versus McMillan. How does that sound?”

Harry glanced at Wayne Hopkins, standing several feet away and caught the boxy thirteen-year-old’s eyes. The army brat blanched slightly but then nodded to Harry, letting him know he was ready for their duel.

Harry suppressed a smirk. Perhaps he could subdue his opponents with his charm and fame?

As Susan and Blaise warmed up with a few stretches, Kingsley spoke in soft tones to Weasley and Finch-Fletchley about their progress in the class. Both were already spending weekend evenings with the professor to catch up, so the grape vine had said, but Harry wasn't too put out by this. He still had to talk to Shacklebolt about his own advanced training. Unfortunately, Blaise would come along as well, thanks to his notion about protecting Harry's back.

Blaise decided to start near the half-wall, while Susan gambled with being out in the open.

Blaise started on the defence first, shooting a dart-like spell toward Susan. He bobbed just above the wall and then crouched back down, not even checking to see where his spell hit. "Conicio spiculum!"

Susan frowned and crouched low as the spell whizzed over her; she countered with applying a shield. "Contego corpus!" Then, she made a slashing motion and aimed at the wall: "Fervefacio!"

The brick hissed and bubbled as the mortar ate at itself and disintegrated, leaving a hole large enough to peer out of. He tried to stem the boils.

"Tepesco!"

A sheen of ice appeared around the hole that Susan's spell made and slowly covered it up. However, during this time, Susan had disappeared from her previous spot and was advancing toward Blaise.

He retaliated by pointing the wand over his shoulder and murmuring, "Advoco aestus."

Susan halted the spells' progress by meeting it mid-air with a household freezing charm. "Glacialis!"

The third-years cheered for her creative spell.

Blaise refused to give up, however, and leapt out from behind the brick wall and shouted in succession: “Gelo corpus! Confuto!”

The first spell missed, but the second hit Susan dead-on after breaking through her protego. She looked around, dazzled, unable to move her body; Blaise hit her with a high-powered suppression spell that was a variant of stupefy.

“Blaise wins!” shouted Shacklebolt, tucking his clipboard under his arm and clapping. Hermione and Su Li whistled and cheered loudly, and Susan welcomed the praise from Wayne and Ernie with a slight blush.

The rest of the duels went similarly, with most students sticking to variants of Ministry-accepted spells like stupefy, expelliarmus, and protego.

When Harry went up, he decided to end things quickly, and put Wayne out of his misery as fast as possible. However, the southern American was a “quick draw” as he had been heard boasting, a regular gunslinger. Harry was quite amused at the mental image and decided to not underestimate his opponent.

After all, Wayne was American, where they discarded Latin-based spells for some time. There, they used English, silent castings, or Native American styled spell casting, peppered with some Latin, Spanish, and Cajun French. Harry was fairly leery of Voodoo anyway; Hermione had mentioned it once bordered on necromancy.

Wayne stood at one end of the platform and Harry at the other. They decided upon formal, International duelling standards of the Dark Force Defence League.

“Duellers, bow!” instructed Shacklebolt loudly, placing his clipboard under his arm and lifting his wand above his head.

Harry and Wayne did as told, bending low at the waist with their eyes on each others’ forms.

“Wands at the ready,” called Shacklebolt, from his position between the two, on the ground. The students were eagerly anticipating this duel.

“Ready,” called back Harry, shifting his right leg back and turning slightly sideways. He held his wand lightly in between his thumb and forefinger, his right arm near his waist and slightly further back than his left, which was in front of his turned torso.

“Ready!” called Wayne, choosing a different stance; his was more aggressive, with both hands mid-waist height, and with his right arm and wand hand in front of his body. He was also turned to the side.

“Duel!”

“Stupefy!”

“Concutio!”

The spells passed each other mid-air, static crackling as both teens hastily and wordlessly put up protego’s. The spells splashed against the gold-coloured shields, washing over them and creating ripples – a testament to their strength.

Almost immediately, Harry began shooting spells out of his wand, dropping to the ground on one knee and then rolling with a shoulder roll to his left and onto the squishy arm of the platform.

“Aduro funiculus!” A fire lasso erupted from Harry’s wand and smacked the duelling platform with a sharp crack that echoed across the empty field.

Wayne raised his wand above his head and drew it down sharply, a trail of neon, light-blue following the question mark shape. “Aqua contego!”

The water from his wand hissed and spit as it reached out and touched Harry’s fiery lasso, but the two dodged in opposite directions, their wands trained on each other and waiting for the next spell.

“Ictus!”

“Sano – decipio oculus!”

Harry waved his wand in a zigzag formation and finished it with a punctured thrust; “Abscido!”

“Funiculus paliurus!”

Wayne dropped to the floor as he conjured a wicked-looking rope that was covered with tiny spikes and thorns. Harry cringed and turned his head as the whip snapped by his cheek. However, the sting that followed told him he was hit.

He gingerly reached up to touch the wound and drew his hand away, sticky and warm with some blood.

“Desino veneficus!” Harry shouted; the spell had neither colour nor any movement. Wayne didn’t know how to block it and froze immediately.

Harry relaxed his stance and Shacklebolt nodded, beginning to clap. The students copied him.

“Good work, Harry – advanced fifth year work there with your stopping spell,” the professor commented. With a silent wave of his wand, Wayne stumbled and strode forward with enough dignity to shake Harry’s hand and mutter, “good duel.”

Harry continued to astound and win his duels, until he went against Blaise. Both had trained together, and it promised to be a good duel, until the bell rang across the field, signalling the end of class.

Several students groaned, having looked forward to the duel between the two friends, but it was not meant to be.

Blaise and Harry shared a grin, one that promised a good duel later on.

“Next time, maybe,” cheerfully commented Shacklebolt. “I’m sure we’re all itching to see that duel.”

“Yeah, next time,” echoed Harry dutifully, but inwardly, he felt relieved.

Worthington wasn’t Harry’s favourite professor. Although they spent the first month of their politics class going over famous trials or mistrials of witches and wizards, Harry felt that he didn’t learn much except that people at Wyckham didn’t think his godfather was that guilty as the Ministry made him out to be.

But today – Harry was looking forward to it. Today they’d get into obscure Ministry laws and choose one from a list to research and present in December before the Hols.

“Before we get into the presentation topics and a brief overview of the laws, I’m going to start this class with an explanation of the Wizengamot, how to obtain seats, what the Wizengamot actually does, and how nobility works in the wizard world,” began Worthington, settling on the edge of his desk and leaning back casually.

“The Wizengamot was created in the 1400s when the monarchy that ruled over the magical British Empire went underground. To this day, no one knows who the descendants of the Pendragon line are. The Wizengamot held originally only 9 seats, which belonged to the following families: Black, Longbottom, Gruffton, Crouch, Bones, Weasley, Prewitt, Malfoy, and Parkinson. Over the centuries, other families were added due to intermarriages or deaths, to include the final 51 seats we have today.”

“Sir,” interrupted Su, raising her hand, “The fifty-one seats that are on Wizengamot currently... do families hold more than one of those seats?”

Worthington nodded. “Some do, like the Potters, due to the Potter seat and the Gryffindor seat.”

“But isn’t the Gryffindor seat the closest to royalty?” asked Neville, flushing and glancing at Harry, who just shrugged at his friend.

“No,” answered Worthington. “While it’s true that the Pendragon line – the royal line to the wizard world – married into the Gryffindor line, the lines of succession are so convoluted with numerous intermarriages and deaths that even finding someone who ought to be royalty is impossible. Most direct lines would have died out by this time anyways, as the Gryffindor line then ended up becoming Gruffton, through illegitimate children. Which means, the Potters who descend from Gruffton, are not royalty. However, they are the second-best, which I will get to in a moment.”

“Tough luck, Harry!” whispered Blaise with a grin, leaning across the aisle to his friends’ desk.

Harry rolled his eyes and shoved his friends’ shoulder, putting him back in his seat.

Harry raised his hand. “So how does the peerage system work and how does it relate to the Wizengamot?”

Worthington sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Honestly, the peerage system is idiotic, but I’ll try to go through it. Mind if I use you as my example, Potter, Longbottom? I’m not too knowledgeable on the Italian system, so I can’t have Zabini as my guinea pig.”

The two teens gave their consent, and Worthington went to the white board at the front of the room and wrote in black, from top to bottom: duke, marquis, earl, viscount, baron, lord, and knights of the realm was written in red above the list.

“That list is the order of the highest ranking peer in the wizard world to the lowest. At the moment, because of the Pendragon to Gryffindor to Gruffton to Potter line, Harry here holds the title of Duke,” here Worthington picked up the blue marker and squeaked across the board Harry’s name with a dash next to “duke”, to appear as: “duke – Harry Potter.”

Neville’s name was added beside that of a viscount.

“Because the Pendragon line disappeared and the Wizengamot was instated, feudalism and nobility were tossed out of the window in 1456. Wizengamot members are elected every five years to their seat, being conservative, liberal, or whatever else is in between or beyond. However, the nice catch in the law says that any nobility line is entitled a perpetual electoral seat.”

Wayne’s mouth dropped open. “You mean anyone who has a title is forever on the Wizengamot, regardless if they’re doing any good?”

“Yes,” sighed Worthington. “And because wizards can live a fairly long time, granted they don’t catch any illnesses or are killed off, you’re looking at a Wizengamot that’s been around since the early 1900s or late 1800s. They’re incredibly conservative and stagnant.”

“So,” Blaise spoke, “essentially Neville and Harry could sit and pass laws and judge at trials?”

“Yes,” sighed Worthington again, a longer, much more suffered sigh. “Now, because of this privilege that nobility can remain on the Wizengamot, the original families back from the fifteenth-century tend to be archaic. Most will retain the thinly-veiled respect for other members of nobility. It is only because of how old the name is – and the position of the peer. If a lord looked down upon a baron, for example, the baron would give a cut direct and the lord would find himself several friends fewer and the society pages in the Daily Prophet would be giddy.”

Harry suddenly felt ill at ease. He was a duke! The highest ranking of them all! People would be grovelling to be his friend! He wouldn’t know who to trust.

“Now, to use Potter again –” Worthington flushed slightly in apology. “Potter’s a Duke, yet is under seventeen. He cannot take control of his seat until he comes into his majority at seventeen, regardless of his parents being dead and his godfather’s conviction. What he can do, like anyone who is the head of the family but underage, is apply an in consuasor locus. An in consuasor locus is what it translates to

in English from Latin; someone who will act in Potter's interest on the Wizengamot seat."

"What would I have to do, do give someone that position?" Harry asked. "And what restrictions are there?" He was suddenly jotting down notes like crazy.

"No restrictions, it could even be a non-magical person who is knowledgeable of the magical world. They just have to be over seventeen, and you have to write a blood-contract to finalize the arrangement," finished Worthington.

Blaise frowned. "Blood, in any rituals or contracts, are frowned on by the Ministry though."

Worthington nodded. "That they are... but we're dealing with nobility. Laws are... bent for them. Nobility will be able to get away with more than a Commoner can do. Potter, especially as Duke, could probably commit murder and plead emotional instability or emotional reasons and the Wizengamot would let him go squeaky clean unless there was a blatant overturn against him."

"Remind me not to kill anyone then," muttered Harry darkly. Blaise suppressed a smirk.

"But the power of nobility is essentially nothing, right?" commented Wayne, tapping his pen against his chin.

"Yes," said Worthington. "Sure, you get a seat, and most are likeminded fools and will cause havoc with conservative laws that only cause harm to the society and line their pockets – but that's it. Others of the peerage will treat you nicely to your face, and Potter can control a lot of them if he wishes by a single word. They don't have to listen, but everyone will want to suck up to him, being a duke, and for his status as the Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry blushed and slid down his seat in embarrassment as his classmates turned to face him.

“It’s all about influence and power, and who you can stab in the back best without getting your hands bloody.”

“Off, off, damn spot!” murmured Blaise from Harry’s side and Harry nodded. He had never liked his title, but Harry was beginning to think that when he was done school he was going to move to Guatemala and become a basket weaver.

It seemed so much simpler, after all.

“All right, you lot, come and get your presentation topics,” the professor called, holding up a hat with tiny, folded pieces of paper in it. “Some of these are laws to research, and others are cases. Either way, if you get a law, find a case that uses the law and if you get a case, and the laws that are in place or thrown out the window for it.”

One by one the five students rose from their desk and read out their assignments.

“Use of Unforgivables by Auror Division in the 1970s,” read Wayne with a grimace.

Su rolled her eyes. “The Lestranges. What precedent was set for this? I thought we said there wasn’t anything.”

The professor winked. “I didn’t mention everything. Dig deeper and search for it. It’ll surprise you and make you really, really hate our current administration.”

Su frowned and sat back at her desk.

“Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery,” read Neville with wide eyes. “That’s so much!”

“I want you to just work on why it was ratified in 1875, Longbottom, and not before that year. More of a history project, but you’ll find some interesting reasons behind it,” Worthington suggested. “It’ll be enjoyable, trust me. Zabini? Potter? What do you have?”

Harry unfolded his paper and read it aloud. "The Dark Creatures Control and Eradication Laws."

Worthington nodded. "Focus on those that are common in England; werewolves, vampires, giants, etc. Don't expand your area too far, so keep it simple."

Harry nodded and thought about contacting Remus for more information or a meeting with the British head of the EVAWOC.

"Severus Snape," read Blaise confusedly from his paper. Worthington gave a slight, disgusted smile.

"Read up on his case, Zabini. It's fairly interesting," offered the professor, who refused to say more on the matter. "Alright – you lot have just over two months to get this project going. Don't dally and try to keep up with outside news of the Wizengamot sessions. They meet from October to May, every two weeks."

On October 23, Harry was the first one to the Café out of his friends that morning, deciding to brush up on his Transfiguration theory, when he saw Ron Weasley receive an owl letter.

He was rather curious – after all, the Weasleys received numerous packages but the owl wasn't the one the Twins had pointed out to him a few years past, the aged Errol. This owl was brown, plain and common – but it had the golden bracelet around its talon that indicated it was a Hogwarts owl.

Ah, the friend from Hogwarts writes, thought Harry, watching the freckled teen avidly. Curiosity was a dangerous trait of his, after all.

Yet the object of his attention – not affection – did not remain in the Café for too long. The teen scrambled up hastily with a pale face and shot out of the sunny room without a bye-you-leave to his sister, who was stuck sitting by herself at the table.

She caught Harry's eye and blushed a horrible red that clashed with her hair. Her head ducked, with her chin almost touching her collar, and she slumped in her seat as far down as she could.

Am I really that intimidating? Wondered Harry in surprise and a bit of annoyance. He was just another student who happened to have a fantastic past, nothing he could truly credit to his own talents except for his recent misadventures.

Nodding forcefully to himself, Harry stood, slung his shoulder bag over his head to rest on the opposite shoulder and strode toward the Weasley girl.

As soon as she saw him come near, she began to gather her quills and books. Her nerves caused more mess than a neat pile, and several loose papers fluttered to the floor.

Harry bent to retrieve them. "Here you go," he said, handing them back to her.

"T-thanks," she gasped out, barely a whisper.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Ginny, right?"

"Umm," the girl began intelligently, blushing to the tips of her ears. She gathered her books and held them tightly to her chest. "Yes," she whispered, staring at Harry in what he believed was a mixture of awe, fear and something else. "Yes, I'm Ginny."

"Are you all right?" asked Harry, frowning slightly.

The girl blinked, and looked around, finally settling her gaze on Harry again. "Um... yes?"

"I meant after the Chamber of Secrets."

Ginny Weasley paled, using her right hand to tuck an errant strand of fiery red hair behind her ear. She nodded. "I – I never g-got to say... t-t-thank you."

Harry nodded at her. "Your welcome. I'm sorry you were put through that."

"M-me t-t-too," she replied. When Harry backed away a few steps, she took the opportunity to bolt to her feet, and with her right hand, grabbed her book bag and raced out of the Café without a goodbye.

"Odd," Harry murmured, staring at the doorway.

"What's odd?" asked a familiar voice from behind.

Harry turned to see Hermione standing behind him, a muffin in her hand. He pointedly looked at it and then at the empty buffet tables behind his closest girl friend.

Hermione flushed.

Harry raised his eyebrows.

"I did some research," the fourteen year old defender herself. "I looked up house elf history."

"Uh-huh," replied Harry lazily, looking back at the half-finished muffin.

Hermione huffed. "If I remained stubborn in my opinions, it would hardly show a willingness to learn, wouldn't it?"

Harry's lazy look slowly transformed into a smug grin. "Uh-huh," he repeated, just to annoy Hermione.

Her cheeks turned pink, but she looked over his shoulder and asked in a loud voice, "What's odd?"

Harry took pity on his friend and turned back to the doorway, watching several seventh and eighth year students enter the Café. "Ginny Weasley."

"The littlest?"

"Yes."

“Again, what’s so odd?”

Harry shrugged, and together the two moved to their table. “Just her manners. Did she always have a stutter? I’m fairly sure when we spoke – briefly, albeit – that she didn’t.”

Hermione looked thoughtful. “It could be a side affect from the Chamber.”

“Possibly,” agreed Harry, “or am I really that intimidating?”

One thing that Harry truly enjoyed from Hermione was her straight-forward manner of reply. Blaise would’ve listened to the question and then make a joke; Susan wouldn’t know how to answer; Dean and Neville would probably defend Harry’s character based alone on the fact of how well they knew him, and Luna would just come up with something entirely unrelated to the question. Luna’s reply would be funny, but not truthful – and truthful was what he wanted from Hermione.

The girl put down her muffin and thought – Harry knew she was thinking carefully, because she began biting her lower lip.

Finally, she opened her mouth and said, “I suppose you could be considered intimidating to other witches and wizards outside of Wyckham because of your confidence and demeanour, although no one in Wyckham thinks you such. It’s most likely because she’s a transfer student.”

“The Twins mentioned something about her having a crush on me,” inputted Harry as well.

Hermione smiled. “I think that’s another good reason as to why she began stuttering. She fancies you quite a lot then.”

Harry groaned and let his head dramatically fall into his arms, crossed on the table in front of him.

He felt Hermione pat his head.

"It's okay, Harry," she was saying, "Most girls grow out of their crushes."

"Most?" came his muffled reply.

"Well, I did overhear something about her having been interested in the story of the Boy-Who-Lived since she was very little..."

Harry just groaned again and wished he had never gone up to the girl to see how she was in the first place.

That evening when everyone was in the Café, enjoying their dinner, Dean spotted Hartz rising from her seat and watching the student body. He nudged Neville and commented, "I think Hartz wants to say something!"

The table quieted down and within a few minutes, the students of Wyckham Academy had their eyes on their Headmistress.

"I know everyone is enjoying their dinner, but I have news to tell you," she began solemnly. "Today, at Shankill Road in Belfast, a suicide bomb went off killing ten people, including the bomber. The Provisional Irish Republican Army has claimed responsibility for the attack. You might have noticed that a few of your classmates are not here this afternoon. Ireland is particularly unstable at the moment and those students went home to spend time with their relatives. I'd like to ask for a moment of silence in remembrance of those who were unfortunately at the wrong place at the wrong time, today."

The students fell silent, looking down at their plates. Harry found Hartz's statement puzzling; although there were students from Ireland or those who had family in the country at the school, it had nothing to do with their studies or their own magical lifestyle – until he remembered what Wyckham's goal was: to unite the best of both worlds.

By announcing the event, Hartz was reminding the students that there was still a world out there where innocent people were hurt every day, without magical interference. It didn't have to be because of werewolves or vampires or bogeymen under the bed – it could be everyday people who caused terror and distress in people's lives.

"I also have another announcement, a little more upbeat this time," continued Hartz, after a minute or two. "On Halloween, I'm inviting the school to join the professors and I out on the field to play a game of Hide and Seek. The game will be controlled with a boundary, being patrolled by the professors. Obstacle courses and 'safe houses' will be set up. Those interested are to sign the form that will be going around the dorms between tomorrow and the thirtieth. One student will be randomly drawn to be 'it.' Thank you."

Slowly the sound of scraping knives and the clank of forks against plates resumed, although the mood in the Café was noticeably dulled.

The topic of conversation was the upcoming game of Hide and Seek, although it was subdued due to the previous announcement.

"Are you going to sign up?" asked Susan, spearing a piece of broccoli. "It sounds interesting!"

"I wonder what the wand rules will be," wondered Neville aloud. "I highly doubt they'll let us carry them, in case someone gets a nasty scare and the poor blighter gets hexed something horrible."

"Serves the bugger right!" laughed Blaise, ignoring Hermione's look at his language.

"Well, we'll find out when the sheet comes around – there's no need to think about it now," sniffed Hermione daintily and turning back to the book at her side, missing the look that Blaise and Dean shared over her head.

Harry saw Neville bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling and Susan gave a soundless sigh. Hermione might be her best friend, but sometimes the smartest girl in their grade was really dense sometimes.

One of the many things that Harry decided he wasn't fond of was Halloween. The holiday had several negative connotations in his life – the worst being his parents' death. But it didn't stop him from joining the game of Hide and Seek, or drooling over the large package of sweets Heather and Robert had sent Harry by owl that morning to share with his friends.

Wands were to be left in dorm rooms, and low-wattage flashlights were given to students. Blaise and Harry teamed up, naturally, while the girls decided to pair with Dean and Neville, calling them “far more sensible than you two great lummoxes.”

While waiting for the rest of the students on the football field, Blaise took to flicking leaves at Harry, who retaliated. The game of flick soon escalated into horseplay, and the two friends began to wrestle.

That was how Flamel found the two ten minutes later, with several students following him.

“Are you two done?” he asked in an amused voice, one eyebrow raised and a twitch at the corner of his lips.

Harry elbowed Blaise in the gut, trying to push the heavier teen off him.

“Oof,” wheezed Blaise, rubbing his knuckles against Harry's head.

“Gerroff!” muttered Harry, trying to wiggle out of the headlock Blaise had him in.

“Say ‘uncle’!”

“Bloody uncle, Blaise!”

The Italian rose to his feet breathless and with a wide grin. Harry rubbed his head and woefully glanced upward; “My hair's a real mess, isn't it?”

“When’s it not?” quipped Corbin Gilbert, an older student passing by; he caused his friends with him to laugh loudly at the comment. Harry’s hair was nearly as notorious as he was.

“All right you lot!” shouted Flamel, his deep voice rumbling over the crowd, quieting them instantly. “Game goes on ‘til midnight. Morning classes tomorrow are cancelled until noon for everyone. No wands, no raising your flashlights above the neck, and no pranks Weasleys.”

A groan was heard from the back of the crowd, causing titters of amusement.

Flamel cleared his throat and continued. “You’ve got until I count out one-hundred to disappear into the boundary we’ve set. The boundary is outline by jars of bluebell flames and you will receive a shock if you exit the boundary anywhere but this entrance.” He pointed to two shields propped up against two neon road pylons.

Blake, Klein, Hartz, and several other professors began walking through the crowd, handing out small metallic items.

Harry looked at his when Blake pressed it into his hand. It was a pin in the shape of an orange pumpkin, with the word Boo written across in gothic lettering.

“All safe houses are marked with shields. If you are in there, you cannot be tagged. Once tagged, tap your pin – these are being handed out. In case you haven’t figured it out yet, those pin also make sure you don’t leave the boundary. There are professors walking around and if you’re caught without a pin, you will be severely reprimanded.

“Again, once tagged, tap your pin. A countdown will begin from fifty to zero. Once zero appears in the air in front of you, the person who is now it may chase after the other students.

“Everyone understand? Any questions?”

Hermione raised her hand. “Granger?”

“Sir – are there any paths lit up in the course? And what do we do if we’re hurt or we don’t want to continue anymore?”

Flamel nodded, smiling at the girl. “Good questions, Granger. Listen up! If you’re hurt or you don’t want to play hide and seek anymore, you double-tap your pin. The professor who is closest to you will follow the signal and find you. Do not leave your location. The course is lit up, but there are also traditional, non-magical elements within the course to add to the funhouse feel. Enjoy yourself tonight.”

Cheers went up from around the students, and Harry shared a grin with Blaise.

Flamel reached into his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. “And the person who is it, is – Benedict Rossini. Where are you, Rossini?”

“Here sir!” called a tall, broody-looking seventeen year old from beside Oliver Wood.

Flamel nodded at him. “All right, Rossini. When I sound the alert, tap your pin and let the game begin!”

At the teen’s nod of acknowledgment, Flamel raised his wand and it let out a loud bang.

Students began running through the two shields and pylons, heading off in numerous directions.

A flash lit up the area briefly, and Harry glanced back with Blaise to see the sequence of numbers in bright yellow count down: 100, 99, 98, 97...

“Let’s go!” muttered Blaise, tugging on Harry’s coat sleeve. His breath was caught in the air in front of him. The temperature had dropped drastically between dinner and the start of the game.

The two ran for several minutes, until they came upon a broken masonry wall. Chanting could be heard from behind it, so the two

crouched and peaked; three witches were around a large cauldron, stirring and tossing items in randomly.

“Double-double, toil and trouble...” began one.

Harry pressed his hand to his mouth to stifle his laugh. The professors sure got creative, he thought, by recreating a scene from Macbeth

Blaise was grinning as well, and motioned that they should continue. The numbers in the sky were now hazy and at 23.

After several more minutes, Blaise stopped his brisk walk and bent at the waist, breathing heavily through his nose. “Whew,” he wheezed, “We must be near the pond.”

“Probably,” huffed Harry. “You’d think that tennis and football would keep us in better shape.”

Blaise chuckled, which turned into a full-blown laugh when the two heard distant screams of fright and laughter float to their direction.

“Sounds like others are meeting up with the traditional funhouse scares Flamel was talking about,” laughed Harry.

“Sounds like it!” agreed Blaise, “Let’s see if we can’t find some of these scares, ourselves.”

The two started off on a single, eerily red-lit path, stopping only for Blaise to retie his shoelace.

Just as he stood, he was bumped from behind.

“Hey, watch it!” he snarled out, recognising the person who bumped into him.

Ron Weasley scowled back, clutching something to his chest tightly. Harry looked at his hand.

“What do you have there, Weasley?” he asked. “Good-luck charm to make it through the night?”

Weasley shook his head, his scowl deepening. A squeak erupted from his hand.

Blaise peered closely, bending slightly, and then stood abruptly again. “Weasley, is that a rat in your hand?”

Harry laughed. “You carry around a rat as a good-luck charm?”

“I do not!” the freckled teen spat out. “He’s my pet rat, Scabbers.”

“Scabbers huh?” commented Harry with a grin. “I’ll say, he looks like he’s been through the wringer!”

Blaise and Harry laughed. Harry then clapped Blaise on the shoulder and said, “C’mon, let’s keep moving. Wherever those two must’ve come from is sure to be a right laugh – that poor rat looks like it’s had the fright of its life, and I’m looking for a good scare tonight myself before snacking on those treats Heather sent us.”

Blaise nodded, and looked over his shoulder at Weasley with a smirk. “See you around, Weasley.”

The two then left Ron Weasley alone on the path, with nothing but his pet rat for company.

AN: (June.10.07) Well! Another chapter done! I hope you all enjoy. Many, many thanks to Colin – Mordecai the Barman – and his excellent help in helping actually make sense of the politics class. I hope that gave a nice tease of what’s to come.

I know that there is a chance that a lot of what will be introduced, or mentioned in passing will not ever be resolved, but my answer is that “Wyckham” I set in the middle of events, not at the beginning, where things were introduced and already established.

Also, because I'm a friend whore, if any of you have Facebook, feel free to add me. Instead of happily sending out my entire name like so – you must search for me by searching in movies "Zenon: Girl of the 21st Century" (exactly like so, just copy/paste), as I am the only person to have this listed. I don't have any important information other than what town I live in, and stalkers are a form of flattery until someone gets hurt. Don't do it. It's not nice.

Now – finally – has anyone read Ben Jonson's "Sejanus: His Fall"? Taking an Elizabethan & Jacobean Drama class and I'm writing my essay on Sejanus. The play is not "gelling" with me. Help, appreciated.

Otherwise – tell me what you thought of the chapter! Cheers, Kneazle

PS: Spells were made up through an English-Latin online translator. I'm uncreative like that. Like -- "thorn rope" and I'd get a spell. Use your imagination.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“So,” began Susan with a slightly curious tone, “What’s this I hear about the two of you having words with Weasley during the game of hide and seek?”

Harry felt his ear tips turn red, and Blaise shifted uncomfortably in his seat. They were in English class, waiting for Hartz to walk in and begin their lesson on Merchant of Venice.

Harry didn’t like thinking back to Halloween evening, for a plain and simple reason: he became his cousin. Although Harry never particularly liked Ron Weasley, and although he was polite, the boy had gone out of his way to antagonize him. Harry never thought he would bully another student! Hartz was so strict on bullying too – zero tolerance. He was lucky he hadn’t been reprimanded by her yet, and that Weasley was keeping to himself about their meeting.

A quick glance at his best friend had Harry convinced that Blaise, too, was feeling slightly shamed for their actions. Blaise did have a quicker temper than Harry, and was more often than not prone to blowing up over little things. He was also fiercely protective of things he considered his, like Harry, and did not take comments or insults at his friends lightly. Loyalty was a strong trait in Blaise Zabini.

Harry sighed, nearly inaudibly. He wished he could go back and change things, but he now had to live with the thought that he was slowly turning into his cousin. Oh, he might never truly be like Dudley, causing harm for fun – but Harry knew there was a side to him that was more than happy to poke and prod fun with witty comments and inane banter. He could quip and smirk all he wanted, but there was a little something that had Harry nervous: he had the ability to hurt people with his words.

He was popular. He was intelligent. He was fun and cool and students looked up to him – and yet he could easily abuse that position. Thankfully, he knew that because he was worried about it, it might not happen again because of his conscious reminder.

“Morning!” chirped Hartz, entering the classroom, a stack of papers under her arm. “I’ve got essays to give back for you! If you have any comments about your mark or things I’ve said, come to my office later and we’ll discuss it, ok?”

She walked between the aisles and dropped essays on students’ desk, all the while giving some background information on Shakespeare’s play.

Harry glanced at his essay when Hartz handed it to him – a solid A, he noted, pleased – and then did his best to pay attention to the class. He liked Shakespeare, but not the play; he disliked the character Jessica with a mighty vengeance, as well, but he liked good grades and dutifully took meticulous notes.

After English he and Blaise left to go to the library to do some last-minute work on their politics class projects, and then took off to math. From math they went to the Café, had a light lunch and spent their time going over their notes for their presentations.

When Harry and Blaise entered their politics class, Worthington was already at his desk, looking over some papers and didn’t look up when they made their way to their seats.

Su Li and Wayne Hopkins entered together, speaking in low tones; and Neville dashed in just before the clock above the door hit 2pm.

Finally, as Neville settled in his seat by Harry, Worthington looked up and smiled at the class. “Are you all ready to present? I’m fairly sure that we can get all of you done in our two-hour period, but in case there is discussion, we can take Thursday’s class as well.”

The students murmured their acceptance of the plans, and Worthington grinned, holding out a hat. “Your names are in here, and whomever I pull out will begin.” He stuck his free hand in the hat and shuffled around a bit, before pulling out: “Hopkins.”

The stocky, American teen stood, gathered up a bunch of notes and went to the professor’s desk.

“The floor is yours,” said Worthington, stepping away from the desk to lean against the shelving above the radiators by the window, his arms and ankles crossed.

Wayne nodded, once to himself, muttering, “right... right,” under his breath before looking up and beginning his presentation.

“I’m covering the use of Unforgivable Curses used by the Aurors in the 1970s. I focused primarily on the main player of the Ministry who allowed Aurors to use the Unforgivables, other periods in time when using the Unforgivable Curses was legal, and covered the question of why. To start, I’ll begin with Bartemius Crouch Senior, who was the head of the Auror division at that time.

“Crouch had that position for numerous years, but was still relatively new to the department. He had the position of Head for only three years when You-Know – sorry, Voldemort, began his first wave of attacks. What seems to be missing from history books is that Voldemort didn’t begin his attacks until 1971, and before then, there is hardly anything known about him or his Death Eaters.

“In June of 1971, the Dark Mark first appeared over a small cottage community in the Lake District where twenty-two people were killed; a family of Squibs, several Muggleborns, and one Half-blood. Crouch was sent to investigate and declared that there was a homicidal psychopath on the loose.

“By 1975, there had been over 200 deaths recorded with the Dark Mark found at the scene of the crime. By now, the entire wizard community knew that the perpetrator was calling himself the Dark Lord Voldemort, and his followers were known as Death Eaters. By 1976, the Auror division only had thirty-one active members. Before 1970, there were over one hundred Aurors. The death toll caused by Voldemort and his Death Eaters killed one-hundred and twenty-five witches and wizards in a period of six years.”

Wayne looked down at his notes and took a deep breath, to calm himself, as he was a little green. Harry didn’t know if it was due to the information he just shared with the class, or if it was because he was nervous. Then, Hopkins continued, “By 1978, Crouch managed to

convince the acting Minister Horatio McCamus to allow his Aurors to use restricted spells against Death Eaters.

“McCamus allowed it and the Aurors began to fight back using the same spells. This continued until 1981, when in November Minister Bagnold overruled the use of Unforgivable Curses and Dark Arts by the Auror division, stating there was no need for it anymore.” – And everyone in the class knew why it wasn’t need anymore, as the reason was sitting with them.

“The interesting piece of note was that McCamus was not the first Minister to allow the use of Unforgivable Curses during a time of war. The first, and only other time Unforgivables were used, was in 1643.”

At the blank look of many of his classmates, Hopkins sighed and shuffled his notes. “In 1642, the first of three civil wars occurred in England, due to Charles I. It pitted Parliament against the ruling monarchy. Anyway, since this isn’t a history class, I’ll skim over a lot. But, for whatever reason, a bunch of young wizards took up banners with the Muggle nobility and the Ministry felt that in order to ensure the survival of the wizarding lines, those who joined the English Civil War were allowed to use magic – even in front of Muggles.

“Long story short, Charles I was executed, his son was exiled and in 1651, Charles II escaped to France and ended the war. Those in support of the Parliaments actions were victorious, if you call it that, and the monarchy was abolished for a period of time. This was until Parliament realized they couldn’t handle running a country without a monarch so they recalled Charles II from his exile to run England.” Here, Hopkins rolled his eyes and muttered something about irony.

“How this relates to my topic is that the use of Unforgivable Curses was only allowed during interior periods of strife. Aurors were not allowed to use Dark spells during the first and second world wars; they were not allowed during the Boer War or any other, unless it was a civil war between the forces inside England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. And this war only deemed acceptable after the Ministry came into power in 1482.

“I did learn that enacting the Sourton Down Act (use of Unforgivable Curses during civil war) could only be done by the Minister. It could only be done if there is a large enough threat to wizard society and only if it remains a... a British thing. If any outside help arrives, then the Act is disbanded.”

Hopkins looked up and met his classmates' eyes. “The question we need to ask ourselves is why using such spells is only allowed during civil war. In the '40s when Grindelwald and his forces invaded England, why was it not enacted? When British soldiers went overseas to fight in foreign lands against their enemy, why were they left defenceless against other, possibly deadly, magic? But importantly: why were Unforgivables allowed in front of non-magical people?

“Granted, this took place before the decree of secrecy was instated; however, magic was still performed in front of non-magical people. Barely two hundred years earlier, there were witch burnings and hunts for ‘heretics’ and devil-worshippers. Unfortunately, these questions cannot be answered by myself. I only have opinions and my own thoughts as to why.”

Hopkins finished his presentation and Harry clapped thoughtfully, thinking about what he learned.

Worthington pushed himself away from the shelves and with a flick of his wand, his hat with names zoomed towards him. “We’ll do discussion after everyone presents, I think. Good job, Hopkins. And next up, we have... Li.”

The Asian girl tucked a straight strand of hair behind her ear and took Hopkin's spot in front of the class. “I’m covering the trial of the Lestranges in 1981 by the Wizengamot.” Here, she sent Neville an unreadable look, and when he nodded back, she continued. “Luckily, this flows nicely from Wayne's presentation, as Crouch's son was one of the Death Eaters convicted, Barty Crouch Junior. Along with him were Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, and his brother, Rabastan Lestrange. On November 5th, 1981, all four were convicted of using one of the Unforgivables – the Cruciatus curse – on two unarmed magical people. They were Frank and Alice Longbottom.

“By unanimous decision, all four were found guilty for using the Unforgivable, and none were repentant about it. They gleefully told the Wizengamot about the torture of the Longbottoms. The focus of my project is on the Wizengamot’s decision of incarceration.

“During this time, Barty Crouch Senior was in charge of the Auror division. Everyone on duty or off duty, as long as they had Auror identification was allowed to use any Unforgivable if they had due cause to use it. Any Auror was also exempt from being suspended or sentenced to time in Azkaban if they misused the Unforgivables. Only Death Eaters or those against the Ministry would be tried in front of the Wizengamot and then punished.

“The Lestranges and Crouch were one of the first in a series of trials that later set precedence for the use of Unforgivables by anyone in the magical community in the UK. The Wizengamot, at first, was very conflicted on how to punish the Death Eaters. The majority wanted to Kiss them, but were reminded of the case of Albert Berg – a wizard who was Kissed after being convicted of raping and killing Emily Montage back in 1897. A few years later, her real murderer had been found. Sentencing someone to be Kissed under British law now dictates that there has to be not a single shred of hesitation or doubt of guilt.

“The Lestranges were all too happy to proclaim their allegiance to Voldemort and describe in detail how they tortured the Longbottoms. However, some on the Wizengamot thought they were being too obvious and that they didn’t commit the crime.”

Neville snorted, and Harry rolled his eyes. Stupid politicians, he thought.

Su sent Neville a look, and the teen looked down at his desk. Harry could see that his hands were fisted under the table top, and his knuckles were white.

“Because of the few who thought the Lestranges were making the crime up, they were unable to be Kissed, despite the majority of votes on the council. They were sentenced to life in Azkaban, without

parole. Initially, they were slated to be Kissed after five years had passed, which would be enough time to gather evidence and find witnesses or cohorts to their crimes. Aurors hoped other Death Eaters would come forward, wanting shorter sentences for their crimes.

“This didn’t happen, and in 1986, the sentencing of being Kissed was dropped from their file. However, to this day, the use of any Unforgivable in any situation will land the witch or wizard straight to Azkaban without parole for five years, minimum. Depending on evidence, the criminal could be Kissed.

“The Lestrage case was the first where Aurors were forced to use evidence in the court to justify their actions. Before 1981, Aurors were allowed to capture, interrogate with Veritaserum and then put the so-called criminals into Azkaban without a trial. Prosecuting Death Eaters publicly, as the Crouch administration had done, only served to create complications for Aurors who could not produce evidence needed to incarcerate known criminals. Others, since then, were able to slip through the justice system by pleading innocence under the use of the Imperius curse. The lack of evidence then allows them to walk free.

“Also, since the Lestrage case, the Wizengamot is unable to use Veritaserum during a trial.” Here, Su Li rolled her eyes. “This was ruled and created during the Lestrage trial because of the amount of useless information that was presented to the Wizengamot and due to the mental capabilities of those on trial.

“Bellatrix and Rodolphus were questioned the most under Veritaserum. They had the potion in their blood stream for nearly a full 24 hours. A Mediwizard later told the Wizengamot that the overzealous use of Veritaserum permanently damaged their brain. Both were declared insane by the Mediwizard and thus the ruling against Veritaserum in the Wizengamot came into effect.

“The Wizengamot should be allowed to question those on trial with Veritaserum if it is not abused, to learn valuable information that could help a case. However, because of the laws that were set by the government after Crouch, known criminals walk free. The judicial

system is a mockery. Those with money can pay off whoever is in charge while those who are innocent are lost within the walls of Azkaban.”

Harry clenched his hand into a tight fist, and felt his teeth grid against each other, his jaw tightening in anger.

Su continued, “it is the responsibility of the public to ensure that those who are guilty are found guilty and must pay for their crimes.”

She finished her presentation and sat down, primly, in her seat, staring at the white board.

“Zabini? You’re up,” said Worthington.

Blaise gathered his cue cards and stepped to the front of the class, clearing his throat once, twice, before shuffling his feet. He then looked up and began his presentation. “My presentation is on Severus Snape, Slytherin, current potions professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Death Eater. I decided to focus primarily on his trial in 1981. His was a closed trial, meaning no one from the public or press was allowed in to watch the proceedings. Albus Dumbledore represented him and claimed that Snape acted as a spy against Voldemort on Dumbledore’s orders.

“All in all, there isn’t much to go by, except for the fact of the crimes against Snape. Most of the Wizengamot wanted him in Azkaban with the rest of the Death Eaters, and he did spend a few months there during the trial. His was the only one that spanned several months whereas other Death Eater cases were fairly open and shut.

“The list of Severus Snape’s crimes is long and damning. It ranges from arson and vandalism of public property to rape and murder. According to other, lower ranked Death Eater snitches, Snape enjoyed his position as the resident potions master in Voldemort’s circle and conducted several experiments on live... subjects.” Blaise’s face twisted for a brief moment and the word barely stuttered out of his mouth.

“A few members of the Wizengamot felt that Dumbledore was trying too hard to have Snape exonerated and wondered for his reasoning. I was unable to dig anything up in trial records and no one who was part of the Wizengamot at that time answered any queries for an interview. However, there were some items I wanted to address.

“First, if Snape was a spy, and one who deeply infiltrated Voldemort's circle, why wasn't the loss cut when he was captured or named? Why didn't the Heads of the Auror department or the Ministry know that Snape was a spy? The Unspeakables would have known, as they are likened to the non-magical secret service. Therefore, if Snape was a known spy to them and Dumbledore, why did he still have a trial? Why wasn't he sent underground?

“Second, why did or does Albus Dumbledore trust Severus Snape? The man is known to be cruel, unjust and temperamental. He has never shown the magical population that he is repentant for his sins committed while under the guise of a loyal Death Eater, nor has he ever been under house arrest. Several other wizards and witches thought to be involved with Death Eaters were watched and placed under house arrest for a few months before being cleared: notably Ludo Bagman. However, Snape never was.

“Thirdly, what evidence does Dumbledore have that shows Snape to be loyal? No evidence was presented to the Wizengamot to prove his innocence. There was a lot of evidence of him being a willing Death Eater. How did Dumbledore convince the Wizengamot to allow Snape his freedom?”

Blaise finished his project and gracefully sat back in his seat, where Harry clapped him on his shoulder in congratulations.

“Potter. Get up there!”

Harry grabbed his cue cards and re-shuffled them, making sure they were in numerical order before he cleared his throat and began.

“One; no Dark Creature or Half Breed is allowed a full time, paying job. Two; no Dark Creature or Half Breed is allowed a government position or one with magical children. Three; no Dark Creature or Half

Breed is allowed to marry or partake in any sexual acts. Four; no Dark Creature or Half Breed is allowed to reproduce. Five; no Dark Creature or Half Breed is allowed legal council or a trial by jury.

“Those are just five of several hundred laws that have not been updated since 1378 when the Dark Creatures Control and Eradication Laws were passed. Should any ‘Dark Creature’ break one of the previously mentioned laws, it would result in instant death.

“Since these laws were passed, there has been no or little change on how the wizard public views so-called Dark Creatures, like werewolves, vampires, giants, veela. The Ministry has done its best to hinder anyone from hiring these so-called ‘dark creatures’ from holding well-paying jobs. The ‘dark creatures’ are looked down upon, scorned, belittled, spat at like they are worthless, like they are worse than a rabid dog.

“The British Ministry and its population are by far the worst of the European countries for their backward and cruel view on anyone who might not be fully human (or magical). The British branch of the European Vampire and Werewolf Outreach Community does nothing to help British, Irish, Scottish and Welsh werewolves and vampires. Werewolves do not receive the Wolfsbane potion for their transformations, which is distributed freely at other EVAWOC centres across Europe. Nor does the British branch help newborn vampires conquer their bloodlust or set them up with a participation card for the unlimited access at the nearest blood bank.

“In general, the EVAWOC is meant to take care of primarily vampires and werewolves, yet in France they manage and help veela as well as several giants in the area. The goal of the EVAWOC is to ensure peace and a sense of community between ‘dark creatures’ and the rest of the population, whether they are magical or not. Of course, the EVAWOC would prefer to handle magical folks as they know of vampires and werewolves compared to non-magical folk, but at the same time, the EVAWOC does not hide what they do.

“Surprisingly, the only other country that has strict laws on repelling ‘dark creatures’ from their community – and might I assure you that their laws are nowhere near Britain’s – is Peru. And this is only

because their laws concentrate more on dragons, such as their Peruvian Vipertooth which prefers human flesh. The Peru branch of the EVAWOC does not have to worry about vampires and werewolves gathering attention compared to baby Vipertooths (Viperteeth?), and therefore only have strict laws for the dragon handlers.

“The country that is most open to ‘dark creatures’, and has several safe houses as well as the worlds’ only full vampire city happens to be Denmark. This is also because members of the royal house in the Danish wizard world have diluted vampire blood – and they take their history very seriously.

“We, as the future generation of the wizard world, must question why the laws of dangerous ‘half-breeds’ have not been amended or changed over time as wizard folk grew to learn about vampires and werewolves; we must question why werewolves are still looked down upon when they are only wolves for a few nights of a month, and can retain their mind if they take Wolfsbane. It is the action of a few – Fenrir Greyback, for one – who makes the entirety of non-human wizards look bad. Why is it that England is so backwards about their laws? Why does the population allow such laws to still exist, and why hasn’t something been done before?

“For countless centuries, werewolves and vampires have borne the brunt of witch hunts, fear, and fascination and currently are pulled in two separate directions by the non-magical media into the amazing and the absurd – as seen in Dracula and Nosferatu. Which does the wizard world choose for its future? Those of us who live in such a world can choose to study and learn from those who may live ‘cursed’ lives, and appropriately change the laws to reflect equality and freedom. The EVAWOC is just a small stepping stone in the right direction... a direction we can force.”

Harry was breathing a bit heavy at the end of his presentation, having got riled up on his soapbox. However, he finished with applause, like all other students, and then swept his hand to the side for Neville.

“And our last presenter, Neville Longbottom and the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery,” commented Worthington, with a slight smile.

Neville stumbled slightly as he left his desk and stepped up to the professor’s much larger space. His hands trembled and he was pale, but Harry had every confidence that Neville would make it out of the presentation all right.

“I-I-In 1875 France, E-E-Eliphas Lévi was killed. H-H-He was a w-w-well known author for s-s-several books of the occult and e-e-even was part of an u-upcoming order. Non-magical r-records show that he died of natural c-causes, but that is untrue. Several of the main t-thesis that he covers in his n-novels were incredibly accurate and caused the French Ministry much trouble.

“Lévi met novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who was interested in the occult and especially Rosicrucianism, and was the president of a minor Rosicrucian order. Lévi knew much about this, so they shared ideas. This was when the British Ministry intervened and Lévi went on his way in his travels. However, despite Lévi’s calm leaving of England, the Ministry feared that the obvious printing of known magical theories might cause the world to be discovered – again.

“The last time the magical world was in the late fifteenth century, during the Spanish Inquisition. Numerous attacks and conversions of faith left the non-magical and magical world torn apart as it became a religious hunt. In the 1600s, the Spanish Inquisition led a witch-hunt – with over 3000 cases. Although England never jumped at the chance to be part of the Spanish Inquisition, it caused many Spanish witches and wizards to flee to England. The influx of magical people was noticed and a mass oblivate followed.

“But back to the nineteenth century – Lévi’s abuse of magical theory caused numerous non-magical folk to notice that perhaps they weren’t alone in sharing Europe. Several school-aged Muggleborns and halfbloods were able to confirm this with showing their schoolbooks and wands, and performing magical feats. These children told their families, who in turn told anyone else they could talk to. This, again led to a mass oblivate, and a team of hit wizards

were sent to... deal with Lévi, as the scapegoat and so-called perpetrator of the crime; also, Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin, a French wizard, was written down in the records to be the father of 'conjuring' for entertainment. He too was considered a perpetrator for the widespread knowledge of magic. However, he died in 1871 and was only able to have his name besmirched posthumously.

"Afterward this wide-spread knowledge of magic, the entire magical community worldwide deemed it necessary to conceal their world completely and created the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. This Decree made it so that children are unable to speak about magic to anyone who isn't in their immediate family, or who is taking care of them. This is limited only to parents and guardians, or siblings. Anyone living within the same structure as the student or underage magic user can be let on in the secret if the Ministry allows it.

"While it was hardly fair to blame two men on their life's work – one as an author, the other as an entertainer – for almost bringing the entire wizard world into the open, the Ministry did react horribly and overdid the laws. Trustworthy family members should be told – and what about mass obliviation? People are constantly slipping through the Ministry's fingers and they walk away with the knowledge that magic could possibly be real. Nothing is foolproof, and the Decree shows this."

Neville took a deep breath, wobbled unsteadily on his feet, and then practically ran to his seat, collapsing in it.

"Good job!" whispered Harry to Neville, while clapping.

"Great job everyone," said Worthington loudly, clapping as well. "Your presentations were well-thought out and detailed. Of course, the essays you will be writing on your information and topic will be in even greater detail..."

The class shared a loud groan, and Neville whimpered. Blaise shot a smirk at Harry at the sound of their mutual friend, and Harry bit the inside of his cheek from laughing.

A bell echoed in the room, signalling that the class was over; Harry scrambled to put his books and notes in order and then slung his book bag over his shoulder.

“Essays will be due when you get back from winter vacation on the first day!” shouted Worthington over the noise of other classes being let out and the low hum of voices from outside the classroom. “Don’t forget! No late acceptances and there will be mark deductions!”

“And here I was,” grumbled Blaise, “hoping for an easy winter break.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Welcome to third year!”

Dec. 4, 1993

Dear Ms. Bones,

I was wondering if you could check into something for me. During our politics/law class, I learned some interesting information about the Sirius Black case. The man was never given a trial, nor did anyone take a statement from him. In fact, it seems as though he was largely ignored while other, higher-profile Death Eaters were given trials and others walked free.

I was hoping that you could check something about witnesses. I went over the case notes that you gave to Susan some time back and I found the note about those who survived the explosion that day. The Obliviatorsquad managed to find everyone in the immediate area and removed their memories of the scene before any Auror could take down a statement.

Is it possible that some may have fled the scene before the Squad or Aurors arrived? And is it possible to track them down, twelve years later? Is it possible that they were overlooked by the Squad and Aurors after all these years, and could have information they the Wizengamot might be interested in if I asked to reopen the Sirius Black case?

I look forward to your Owl. Many thanks,

Harry Potter

The winter exams passed in a blur – Harry was sure he did fine on them all – except maybe transfiguration. With his law project over and done with, he was free to explore more into the Wizengamot and their trials – particularly Sirius’s trial, which had yet to yield any results. Harry could not find a way to free his godfather from his criminal status without producing Peter Pettigrew. On top of that, he kept getting migraines at the oddest times.

This year, Harry opted to stay with the Woolworth’s for Christmas, but promised to Floo to Blaise’s house before the Ministry Ball. Neville and Susan would be there, as usual, but Harry was hoping that Amelia Bones would have news for him that his lawyers and Sirius couldn’t uncover because of the Ministry stamps of approval on Sirius’s file.

On the first day of break, the 18th, Harry woke up to a white, snow-covered backyard. Giddy, he dressed warmly with extra socks and sweaters, pulled his jeans on and dashed downstairs, skipping the last few steps on the staircase.

Sean was waiting for him, Harry’s jacket in his outstretched hand. The two ignored Heather’s cry (“be back inside in an hour for breakfast! And be dry, please!”), and dove headfirst into a large snow bank. Laughing, Sean quickly rolled the packing snow into a ball and tossed it at his younger foster brother. The two began a snowball fight that lasted longer than an hour.

However, when they entered the house, they found their breakfast still warm in the oven. The two shared a grin. Heather wouldn’t let them starve. She was too much of a mother to do that.

The next day Harry went into town with Robert and Sean for Christmas shopping. Suddenly Harry had a few more people to shop for and he had no idea what to get them.

For Blaise, Harry bought a Boris Becker poster and book about Wimbledon; Hermione received a Jane Austen box set of all her novels; Neville's present was a book on the history of horticulture; Dean received a West Ham jersey (not like he didn't have one before, but Harry got him a signed one by Steve Potts); Harry got Susan a diary; Luna was easy to shop for – all Harry had to do was go into an Odds and Ends store and find the gaudiest thing he could. The Twins received gag items from the It Store; Colin Creevey would receive several rolls of film and a book on Andy Warhol. Don would happily receive a book on Evil Knievel with a note to strictly not try anything without adult supervision or an ambulance on call. Jens received a sketch pad and some very expensive pencils that Harry was assured were the best.

With his friends finished, Harry had to buy items for his family – Heather (and help from Sean and Robert) received a very nice Burberry bag; Robert and Sean both received electronics and Holly, now five and in kindergarten, would receive several Disney films. Sirius needed just about anything and everything, but having heard stories about his beloved motorcycle, the Woolworth men (foster or otherwise) stepped in and bought Sirius a BMW 1993 K75S cruiser. Robert, Sean and Harry were sure the dog animagus would appreciate the bike. However, for Remus, Harry was very torn. In the end, he settled for a biography book of Martin Luther King, Junior.

Once his Christmas shopping was complete, he sent a letter off with Hedwig to his lawyers, hoping that they could possibly uncover something he and his friends hadn't in Sirius's trial notes. Overall, Harry was feeling rather ticked about Crouch's post-war government.

As the three Woolworths (or rather, Woolworth, Pickford and Potter) entered the Tudor, Harry was surprised to see Heather waiting for them in her kitchen apron.

"What are you cooking?" asked Robert, bending to kiss his wife's cheek, before heading toward the kitchen. Sean's nose wrinkled in delight as the delicious scents of roast beef and scalloped potatoes wafted into the hallway.

Heather smiled and said breathily, "We'll have company for dinner tonight, so I wanted to do something special."

Harry's eyebrows shot up, and as he walked down the hallway, he stopped, looking into the den. His godfather happily lounging on a couch, watching East Enders and looking completely enthralled.

Sirius's face was fuller, although his cheeks were still slightly hollow; his hair was short and styled into an attractive look for the thirty-something man. Sitting next to Sirius on the leather couch was Remus.

"Hey Remus, Sirius," greeted Harry, dropping his bags. He turned to Remus, who smiled in greeting. "Back from Croatia, then?"

Sirius lifted a hand in greeting, eyes glued to the show; Remus nodded and Harry sat next to his father's friend. "How was it?"

"It was alright," answered the werewolf. "Although I ran into a few problems that I'll have to let the EVAWOC know about."

"Like what?"

Remus sighed, running his hand through his sandy-coloured hair. Harry hadn't noticed when he last met Remus, but there was the beginning of grey at his temples. "Some of the outer werewolf clans are... well, I don't know really how to put it. But they were antsy... almost frightened of something coming."

"Like something coming to attack them?" asked Sirius as a commercial came on screen, joining the conversation.

Remus shook his head. "No. The outer werewolf clans are still very aggressive and barely tolerate the Community's help. They were antsy because they felt change. I'm sure this is going to be reflected by the vampire community at their council meeting in a few weeks. Something's bothering them and I don't know what it is."

“Weird,” replied Harry. “How’s the British branch, by the way? I was doing a law project Dark Creatures Control and Eradication Laws and let me tell you – it’s absolute shit!”

“Harry Potter!” warbled Heather’s voice from the kitchen. Harry winced.

“Mum radar,” he whispered in fright. “I swear she can hear me even when I’m in my room.”

Sirius chuckled. “Yeah, Lily was like that too when she heard us bad-mouthing Snape.”

Harry made a face. The corners of Remus’ mouth tweaked upwards a bit. “I see you met him, Harry?”

“Unfortunately,” the teen murmured, staring unseeingly at the TV. “Anyway, what’s the British branch of the EAWOC saying about the outer clans?”

Remus shrugged. “Nothing much, as usual. They don’t seem to care and won’t care until it becomes a bigger issue. But because of it, I’ve been asked to stay in the UK and make contact with the clans that have been ignored by the previous liaison.” A smirk appeared on his face. “He was made redundant.”

“And you got the job,” laughed Harry. “At least you’re far more competent. You know what you’re doing and the clans like you.”

“True,” agreed Remus without false modesty. “But I also happen to be in the job longer than most and I can deal with high-pressure situations. Most clans won’t fight against a Community member since we try to make things easier for them.”

The three on the couch fell silent, each left to their own thoughts.

Something was coming, Harry was sure of that. The vampires and werewolves were like animals – their senses were always in overdrive and able to perceive changes in the atmosphere quicker than humans. And with their perceived ‘darkness’, vampires and

werewolves would know about underhand dealings with dark wizards and witches before the rest of the world knew.

Harry fought a shiver, drawing his sweater closer in to his body. It was all a matter of time, he thought, darkly, before the shit hit the fan. And with his luck, he'd be right in the centre of it.

The Ministry Ball was held in a ballroom in Muggle London; undercover Aurors who could pass as Muggles planned the event, and several Obliviate-specialists were on hand if guests became too rowdy.

Harry arrived with the Zabini's, as per custom. Mario immediately dashed off to find some friends from Wyckham that he knew, happy to be allowed to go off on his own for the first time. Blaise and Harry made their way around the ballroom to several side rooms. In one, they found the 'children's' area.

"Blaise! Harry!" called Susan, waving her entire arm from the far side of the room, and gathering everyone's attention. Neville blushed red beside her as he felt people's eyes on him.

Harry nodded and Blaise waved energetically back. Off in one corner, Draco Malfoy and his ever-present bodyguards Crabbe and Goyle sat in a semi-circle, ignoring everyone else.

"When did you two arrive?" asked Blaise, as he and Harry met with Susan and Neville.

"About thirty minutes ago," answered Neville easily. He was dressed in fashionable dress robes, in a dark green colour, and underneath had a cravat and waistcoat. Harry felt his eyebrows rise when he took in Neville's formal wear.

"Do all wizards and witches wear items like yours, Neville?" asked Harry, without any hint of arrogance or condensation in his voice. He was purely curious.

Neville blushed, running a hand down the front of his waistcoat. "It's a bit outdated, isn't it?" he replied.

Blaise grinned. "Well, I'm sure it was the height of fashion... back in the 1800s. Now, Susan, on the other hand..."

Susan laughed, and did a little twirl in her red satin dress, with matching robe on top. "Why, thank you, Blaise!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I think we'll have to watch out for this one," he said, jerking a thumb in Blaise's direction, "He's already getting practice in, trying to charm the ladies."

"Well, it's working, Mr. Potter," gripped Susan playfully, "And you'll have your work cut out for you if you don't start practicing your flirting!"

Harry rolled his eyes, and turned when he saw Draco move towards the group in his peripheral vision. "Hello Draco," greeted Harry politely.

"Harry, Blaise," greeted Draco back, friendly. He then added, "Longbottom, Bones."

The two friends of Harry's and Blaise's murmured their greetings back. The five didn't speak for a moment or two. The atmosphere become tense and slightly uncomfortable, until Blaise's stomach rumbled loudly for everyone in their loose circle to hear.

Neville and Harry laughed heartily, and Susan grinned; one of Draco's eyebrows shot up as he looked at Blaise with thinly veiled amusement. "Hungry, much?" he drawled.

Blaise blushed. "A bit, yeah."

"Than we might as well get you something before you pass out," chuckled Neville, leading the way out of the room to another, where a buffet of finger-foods was set up.

The five teenagers happily chatted about everything and anything (but avoided topics of blood purity and Wyckham or Hogwarts), munching on diced vegetables, chocolate-covered strawberries and thin wafers and sliced meats. They had a perfect view into the ballroom, and could easily been seen by their parents.

“Uh oh,” murmured Susan darkly, tensing beside Harry, her gaze on someone in the ballroom. “Don’t look now Harry, but we’ve got a six o’clock.”

At Draco’s confused look, Blaise began to whisper explanations, but Harry turned, as casually as he could to face the ballroom. There, he saw Albus Dumbledore conversing with several high profile members of the Wizengamot. All were laughing and looked excited about whatever their topic of conversation was.

Harry felt uneasy, all of a sudden.

As Dumbledore turned, their eyes met for a moment and Harry immediately strengthened his meagre Occlumency shields. Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, and saluted Harry with the drink in his hand, but then turned around.

Harry felt a tinge of annoyance. Dumbledore was ignoring him! Since when? The man always went out of his way to either say something to the teen or to convince him of something, or at the very least, track him down.

Harry narrowed his eyes. This did not bode well – something had happened that had Dumbledore thinking he had the upper hand over Harry, in some way. Harry hoped it wasn’t something serious, but the clenching in his gut told him differently.

And he was very, very right.

Harry knocked on Hartz’s closed office door, his stomach clenching in fear and worry. The news had been buzzing around the school since he returned with Blaise earlier that afternoon: Dumbledore had

passed a law that monitored all wands in wizard business areas like Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade.

At first, Harry was just as confused as the other students, as some of his comments during his interview were digs at Wyckham – but then it dawned on him.

Harry felt a stirring of anger in his belly. Without a thought, he whipped out his wand and smartly said, pointing it at Dumbledore's water glass, "wingardium leviosa!"

The glass rose swiftly and steadily; Robert watched in awe and pride; Joseph and Duncan were a little annoyed but content; and Dumbledore was in shock. He glanced around and asked, "Is this room masked for underage spells?"

"You won't find the Ministry sending me a letter," replied Harry smugly, ignoring the warning bells going off in his subconscious.

"Oh, shit," the teen breathed, the colour draining from his face. The room spun, and Harry leaned onto a nearby wall for support. What had he done?

The only way to make amends was to tell Hartz. With that in mind, Harry had gone to Hartz's office and stood uncertainly outside of it. However, a brisk "enter," made him summon his courage and he did as he was told.

"Well, Harry?" asked Hartz, looking up from her desk. She had purplish bags under her eyes, indicating that she hadn't been sleeping so well lately. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Harry fidgeted slightly and then firmly planted his feet shoulder-width apart, his hands clenched at his sides. "I know how Dumbledore found out about Wyckham students being able to use under-age magic without the Ministry knowing."

Hartz stilled. She brushed a stray lock of brown hair away from her cheek, and asked, almost hesitantly, "And how do you know that?"

Embarrassed, Harry felt heat crawl up onto his cheeks. “I know because during my meeting with my lawyers, he saw me use magic.”

Hartz’s face was slack in disbelief. As the silence stretched on between them, Harry felt dread creep into him. Would Hartz expel him? Would he be forced to go to Hogwarts? Or would he just have to deal with a punishment such as being kicked off the Quidditch or football team?

“Oh, Harry,” moaned Hartz, dropping her face into her waiting hands. “How could you? I thought you were smarter than that!”

Shame made his blush intensify. He honestly thought he was smarter than that as well. Harry blinked rapidly, sniffed a bit and tilted his chin up higher. He stared out at the windows behind Hartz’s desk, out onto the Wyckham grounds.

The two didn’t speak for some time, until Hartz shifted in her seat. “The damage is done,” she finally said, resigned. “I’m not happy about this, Mr. Potter.”

Harry flinched.

“But—” Hartz continued, “But, in the long run, it might be something we’ll be glad to have.” The Headmistress turned in her swivel chair seat to stare out at the Wyckham grounds as well, no doubt thinking about whatever the future may bring.

“You don’t believe Voldemort is gone?” asked Harry.

Hartz turned back to face Harry and gave him a bitter smile. “No, he’s definitely not gone.”

“Oh.”

Hartz sighed, a long, drawn-out one, and said, “Robert and Heather will be talking to you later, Harry. We will have to come up with some sort of punishment, but no one needs to know. You could’ve caused Wyckham to shut down – a lot of things can still go wrong. Dumbledore has the power of the Wizengamot, and while we have

several heirs to seats, you are all too young for politics. Tread carefully and watch what you say," she suggested. Her eyes darted away from Harry's.

"Yes, ma'am," murmured Harry, contrite. When she dismissed him with a wave of her hand, Harry left the office feeling much worse than when he entered.

Apparently, he still had quite a lot to learn about.

AN: (August.21.07) Well, here it is. Two months in the making, due to the amount of research I needed to do about occultists, magicians, and double-checking my previous chapters as well as future chapter outlines: chapter twenty-two. I hope it's long-anticipated await comes with happiness and some eyebrow-raising questions about Harry's magical world and what might happen in the future.

A question came up on my Yahoo Group about Deathly Hallows – but it was part of a discussion. I'll address this currently: I read 53 pages of DH and then sold it to my friend because I couldn't read it. I was unable to finish the Harry Potter series, for numerous reasons (and shipping wasn't it). As such, other than Horcruxes, there will be nothing about the Peverells. Also, this story is firmly AU. I've already slowly introduced one of the main magical aspects/traits/thingies of the plot for when our main characters become older.

As per usual – if you see any mistakes, let me know. If the history part was too much and you skipped a lot, it probably won't be worth remembering in the future... not yet at least. You won't have another chapter that detailed with historical retelling, I think. Anyway – read, enjoy, and review. And see you all in September! Kneazle

PS: a little advance warning; don't expect an update during October. It's going to be a busy month with my mom's birthday, my friends' birthday a few days earlier, Oktoberfest, and skipping school to go to the Toronto Literary Festival and ogle Jasper Fforde. And several movies to see with Sam, and book shopping... and you get the picture:D

PPS: If anyone is interested, on my Yahoo Group I have several challenges posted in the files section. If you happen to take up a challenge, don't forget to post in a message a link so we can all read it!

Chapter Twenty-Three

Harry kept his head down for the rest of January, eager to not make any more slip-ups or get into more trouble. After Hartz spoke with his guardians, Harry found himself benched for the second semesters' Quidditch and football matches, much to Oliver Wood's displeasure. The seventeen-year-old had been bothering Harry about trying to get the ban revoked, but so far neither Harry nor Hartz had any inclination to do so. Hartz because of what Harry did, and Harry because he felt he deserved the punishment.

"Besides," said Harry to Oliver one night while at practice, "The team is amazing so it's not like I'm needed entirely, anyway. I'm not the trump card kept in the wings that has the team winning each and every game."

"But, but," sputtered Oliver, after much arm-waving and yelling, in an angry, thick Scottish burr, "You're bloody amazing!"

"And so is everyone else on the team," countered Harry tiredly. "It'll help them work on their skills without leaning on me to pull the winning goals. I'm still doing practice to keep in shape – I'm just not playing during games."

Oliver frowned and ran a hand over his short brown hair. "Fine," he grumbled. "Then you're my assistant coach during games. You're not playing but you're still involved!"

Harry sighed but agreed.

Because of his benched status, Harry was more often than not able to slip away from Wood's side to spend more time with Flamel, working on his Occlumency. It was slowly coming along – but difficult. Harry had numerous thoughts whizzing through his head constantly, making it hard for him to 'shut his brain up' in Blaise's words.

However, Flamel was confident that Harry would be able to repel minor mind attacks if Dumbledore, or even Snape, ever became curious – for a few moments anyway, for help to arrive.

On one sunny and chilly Saturday afternoon, Blaise and Harry decided to spend some extra time outside after football practice, instead of going inside Wyckham to start some homework.

Blaise was giving Harry a running commentary on their teams' opinion of Harry becoming Wood's assistant coach. Every time Blaise's slowly deepening voice hit a particular loud or high note, Harry winced.

"Oy, what's up with you?" asked Blaise finally, with a wide, joking grin. "Am I boring you, mate?"

"No," replied Harry absently. He reached up and rubbed at his forehead, frowning deeply. "I've been having some really bad headaches lately."

"Have you taken a headache relief potion for them?" asked Blaise in concern.

Harry nodded. "I've taken all I can. I'm already pushing the medical limit."

"And it's doing nothing?" Blaise's voice rose in surprise and shock.

Harry winced, and Blaise flinched in response.

"Sorry," Harry's best friend whispered. He paused. "Do you know what's causing them?"

"These migraines?" Harry shook his head. "Not a clue. I had a few at the beginning of the school year, just twinges of pain really and I thought they were stress related... but now it's nearly daily... all the time. In the morning, the afternoon, the evening, when I'm trying to sleep... concentrating on school work..."

"Well, I haven't seen your grades slip," commented Blaise with a tiny smile. He nudged Harry's side.

Harry gave a weak grin in reply. "Thanks."

The two fell into silence and Blaise idly nudged his toe into a snow bank and began to shift the packing snow into a blob.

“Do your guardians know about the pain?” he asked.

Harry nodded. “I took a lot of aspirin over the holidays, and Heather noticed it missing the most and confronted me about it. She said if it didn’t get any better by Easter, she’s booking a doctor’s appointment.”

Blaise frowned in sympathy. “Tough luck, mate.”

Harry nodded, and sighed. He shoved his cold hands deep into his jacket pocket and rocked slightly on his heels. “Think we’d best go back inside?”

“Sure,” agreed Blaise, and together the two walked silently back to the school. Both enjoyed the quiet of the Saturday afternoon; most students were either in their rooms or the library, or doing something with their clubs rather than hanging around the corridors.

However, as they reached the second floor, nearing their dormitory, raised voices were heard.

Harry and Blaise shared a frown; most students got along. Was someone having a particularly violent or humiliating break up?

“I don’t care what you think! He’s gone!” shouted a familiar voice.

“Weasley,” hissed Blaise, a pained expression on his face.

“Calm down!” ordered another voice, “You don’t know what happened, you can’t just go around randomly blaming people!”

“That’s Neville!” offered a shocked Harry. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not blaming random people! It was him! I swear it! Potter!”

Harry stopped where he was, mid-step. A sudden, furious expression settled over his face, and Blaise followed behind his irate friend;

Harry stormed into the large crowd of students, most of who parted when they saw him.

Ron Weasley was beet red, waving his arms all over the place as he shouted at Neville and Dean; the two boys, on the other hand, were calmly trying to reason with Ron, hoping to soothe him. Hermione stood a little away, watching in shock with Susan; Luna and Harry's other charges, Don, Jens and Colin huddled together near Harry's room (maybe they were coming to see me? He thought idly).

Harry caught Ron's brothers eyes – Fred and George were leaning against the wall, both watching the spectacle with shuttered eyes. They were not standing up for their brother, but they weren't trying to stop him, either. The littlest Weasley, the girl, was a few steps away from her brother, trying to get him to stop, begging him to leave before things got worse.

And they're about to, thought Blaise, biting his lip.

"And just what," began Harry with a dangerously low voice, "was it that I supposedly did, Weasley?"

The crowd hushed in anticipation and surprise as Harry stepped into the circle, moving to stand near Neville and Dean.

Ron turned to face him, all arms and legs, but he held himself up as tall as he could (which was a good head taller than Harry), and sneered, "You know what you did, Potter!"

"No, sorry," shrugged Harry, maintaining a blasé appearance. It wouldn't do to show that his temper was just as short as the redhead's. "What is it that I apparently did?"

"Scabbers is gone!" shouted Weasley.

Harry winced; he was surprised no professor had come to see what was going on, or for that matter, why no prefect or older student had arrived yet.

"Who's Scabbers?" asked Blaise, from Harry's side.

Ron turned his sneer to Blaise; “He’s my pet rat!”

Harry blinked. “You’re blaming me for your pet rat missing? Jesus Christ, Weasley, there must be near sixty cats alone in this building and you’re blaming me for your rat being gone? Haven’t you ever thought that he was eaten?”

“You did it! You did it!” Ron shouted. Harry was sure he’d resort to foot stomping. “You’ve hated me ever since we first met – you wouldn’t care about a rat of mine, you’d want to take it just like you have everything else!”

There was a large intake of air; the crowd around them had realized that Ron was hitting some low blows, but there was suddenly more than just his pet rat that had Ron angry.

“Excuse me?” Harry’s voice rose shrilly, in surprise and anger. Two pink flushes appeared on his cheeks.

“You heard me,” replied Ron petulantly.

Harry took two menacing steps forward and Ron took one fumbled step backward.

“When I first met you, Weasley, you disregarded me because I am friends with Draco Malfoy. You didn’t like me because I hold rank,” Harry hissed, ignoring Luna’s chirp of “Duke!” in the background. “When you arrived here, you did nothing for yourself but whinge and complain, rather than try to see the best of it. Then you labelled me a blood purist! Now, I’m going to ask you: what the hell did I ever do to you?”

Ron looked like a fish out of water as he gapped in surprise and slight fear. Harry had never raised his voice before, to anyone at the school, to his friends. He was a model student.

And now the Wyckham students and his friends were suddenly seeing the Boy Who Lived, a hint of the power that Harry wielded and

embraced. They were seeing a shadow of what removed Voldemort from their world twelve years ago.

“You bloody prat,” continued Harry, sneering at the taller redhead, “How dare you think that of me when I have done nothing to ever show that I am a hypocritical racist!” Harry took a deep breath and then did his best to stand at his full height, and looked down his nose at the redhead. “As for your rat, Weasley – the thought that I did anything to it is just plain stupid.”

“You have an owl! I bet it ate him!” Weasley whined in a low voice.

Harry practically hissed at the teen. “Hedwig, Weasley, is a snowy owl. While she eats rodents and mammals, I doubt she’d ever eat your poor church mouse.”

Blaise didn’t suppress a wide grin at Harry’s side.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” drawled Harry in a perfect imitation of Draco Malfoy’s aristocratic tone, “I’m going to my dorm.”

Or, rather, Harry would’ve gone to his dorm, if it wasn’t for Ron’s fist colliding with his cheek.

Harry’s head snapped to his right, spit and blood flying. Harry stumbled, half surprised that Weasley managed to land a bit, with that much force, and half to recover his balance.

“You little piece of –” Harry didn’t even finish that sentence before he charged at the redhead, landing a blow to the teen’s midsection.

The crowd shrieked and several ran off to the safety of their room – the Twins were dragging their sister away, despite her shouts (“Stop it, Ron! Stop it!”); Blaise was right beside Harry, egging him on and Dean and Neville did their best to herd Susan and Hermione away, especially as some of the blood from Harry’s split lip had landed on Hermione’s sweater.

The rest of the crowd didn’t move and happily formed a ring.

Ron pushed Harry off him and then swung widely, trying to land another punch. Harry dodged and jumped back, and the two began to circle. Ron lashed out with his leg, trying to trip Harry but he jumped, avoiding the leg. However, Ron did manage to hit Harry's shin, but Harry got him back and into a headlock before the redhead pulled out, his hair nearly as messy as Harry's.

Harry balled his fist and hit Ron in the face, making the redhead stumble back with a loud "Merlin!"

However, it didn't distract him, having grown up with five older brothers. He stood up again soon and went after Harry. The two were now moving back and forth, but closer and closer to the main stairs.

Both Ron and Harry had punches landed on them; Harry looked like he came from a nasty football practice with his split and swollen lip, limping slightly. Ron on the other hand, had his left eye closed from where Harry's knuckles landed and had a bloody nose.

Panting, the two stood several feet apart. Ron was wiping the back of his hand across his swollen cheek and Blaise was frowning as he looked over Harry's bruised form.

"Have the two of you had enough?" asked a cool, clipped voice, which instantly silenced the murmuring crowd.

The students parted like Moses parted the sea, revealing Miles Bletchley, Roger Davis, Oliver Wood and Elizabeth Underhill. The four seventh years were staring down at the younger students, with Roger and Miles leaning against the wall while Elizabeth had her arms crossed. Oliver, on the other hand, looked incredibly ticked off.

"Potter," he growled, the r rolling heavily at the end of the angry sound, "With me. Now."

Winching slightly, Harry nodded, sent Blaise one of their wordless glances, and followed Oliver down the hall, ignoring the students who whispered as the two walked by.

Vaguely, as they walked, Harry heard Miles snap, “Move on you lot, the fights’ over!” and Weasley snapping back – but then he and Oliver turned the corner and he was being led up a dark side staircase to the third floor.

The staircase was narrow and had no railing, and the only light came from the few recess lights that were hidden in the ceiling, set low to appear dim. To Harry, it appeared ominous.

As the two emerged from the stairwell, Harry glanced around curiously. He and his friends had never travelled to the third floor, mainly because the rooms were all single dorms for fifth year students and above, preferring peace and quiet for their OWLs, NEWTs, and A-Levels.

The second floor was filled with paintings and wood panelled walls, keeping to the décor of a seventeenth-century English manor; the third, comparably, had beige stucco-like walls and seemed brighter, airier, and much more modern than the second or first floor.

Pieces of artwork were showcased in glass displays, and several large bay-windows lined the entire length of the hallway, facing over the large back gardens of the school. The dorm rooms all faced over the drive way and offered a quieter view.

Mutely, Oliver stopped in front of a single door. He pulled his wand out and flicked it; the door opened and Harry was impressed enough to realise that Oliver had wordlessly cast an *alohamora*.

The Scots square jaw was tense and he jutted it out a bit – indicating he was far from pleased – and with a sharp gesture, offered Harry to enter the room before him. Tentatively, Harry obeyed.

Oliver’s room was a bit smaller than the shared dorm Blaise and Harry had. He had a bed against the wall, a writing desk and dresser and closet like Harry and Blaise, but Oliver’s single dorm also included an oversized armchair and side table near a second window, and a low table had a TV with VCR and stereo on it. The walls were plastered with football and Quidditch posters just as much as the shelves were all lined with books.

Harry stepped up to one of the shelves and began to read the titles, acknowledging most as school texts, until, "You read Kafka?"

Oliver nodded and settled himself into the armchair, crossing his legs ankle-over-knee. "You'll also find an anthology of Poe, further down the shelf. I prefer my literature dark, cynical and gothic."

"Really?" questioned Harry, turning and sitting in the office chair nearby, which he swivelled to face Oliver. "I never took you as—" He winced.

"An academic?" wryly finished Oliver, quirking his lips into a dark smirk. He leaned back in the armchair and crossed his arms, lowering his head and casting shadows on his features. "All everyone sees is a jock because that's the image I project on and off the field. Of course, most students seem to forget that to remain on a school team you must maintain an average of a B-minus."

Harry, properly chastised for his faux pas, blushed and looked down at the hardwood floor of Oliver's dorm.

Silence stretched between the two.

"Would you like to explain what that fight was about?" the older teen finally asked. His voice was devoid of any emotion.

Harry shrugged.

"Is that a no or a yes?"

"It's an I don't know," replied Harry tersely, finally looking up with a mulish expression. He glowered across the room at Oliver, who hadn't changed his position or his stoic expression.

"You do realise that tomorrow morning when you go down to the Café, the professors will see you and Weasley's condition and will know what happened, right?" continued Oliver, as though Harry hadn't snapped at him.

Harry refused to comment, but Oliver wasn't deterred.

"You can explain to me what happened right this second and we can see if something can be worked out privately between you and Weasley without getting the professors involved," offered Oliver, in what he thought was a generous offer, "or you can explain to the Pirates and the football scouts why I'm kicking you off the team."

"What!" gasped Harry, surging to his feet in shock and horror. "You wouldn't!"

Oliver's expression darkened. "Potter, you were caught fighting with another student. Wyckham students do not brawl with one another. Wyckham students are not uncouth. From day one, all you hear about this school and Headmistress Hartz is that bullying and fighting is not allowed and from the rumours floating around, you've done both recently."

Harry felt the colour drain from his face and, upon feeling his knees begin to shake, slowly sunk down into the office chair. He fisted his hands at his side to keep Oliver from seeing how badly he was shaking.

"Now, explain," growled Oliver, and Harry did.

It was nearing ten by the time Harry was finished, but Oliver listening patiently and without interruption. Finally, he stood and said, quietly and a thick burr, "go back to your room, Potter. I'll talk to you on the morrow."

Harry did as he was instructed, speaking to no one as he used the same side staircase to the second floor. Blaise was waiting for him in the dorm, but the look of utter despair on Harry's face kept the Italian quiet.

Harry woke at five, much earlier than normal and found solace in a quick jog around the field. The morning air was crisp and a fresh blanket of snow had fallen overnight.

On his second lap, ignoring the stitch in his side, Harry was joined by Fred and George Weasley. Briefly, he entertained thoughts that they had tracked him down to beat him up, but then corrected himself. It wasn't like he was in a sequel to the Godfather or something.

They did half a lap before Harry suddenly stopped, his hand on his side and bit out, "alright, what's this about then? Just say it already."

The twins shared a look, and Fred sighed. "Listen, Harry, mate—"

"You know we like you—"

"No doubt about that, but—"

"There is something you need to know—"

"About Ronnikins," the finished together. Harry wearily waved them on to continue, and George took up the opportunity.

"Ron is..." the older brother paused. "Complicated." He nodded to himself, liking the word, "Yes, that's it. Ron's complicated. With five older brothers, Ron never had his time to shine, you know? Bill was Head Boy at Hogwarts and now works for Gringotts as a curse breaker and has travelled more than anyone else in the family all over the world; Charlie's a dragon-keeper and even came here to Wyckham for a year to study independently about dragons and zoology before he applied in Romania; Percy was a prefect and is now Head Boy at Hogwarts; we're both well known pranksters, and Ginny's the only girl in several generations."

"So where does that leave Ron?" the two asked together, aimed at Harry. The two had finished their conversation and left the track, and Harry, behind.

True to his word, Oliver had spoken to Hartz and the other professors and took Harry's punishment into his own hands – so to speak. Heather and Robert were informed that something occurred on

campus but none of the adults knew precisely what. The students kept the knowledge to themselves, and Harry and Ron weren't doing anything to stop the rumours floating about the school.

Oliver placed Harry on the bench of the remainder of the school year on both teams and told him his place was conditional next year depending on his behaviour henceforth. Harry thought he got off easier, compared to Weasley who received a Howler in the middle of lunch from his mother and suffered humiliation in front of the student body.

During an Occlumency class with Flamel, Harry mentioned the headaches he was getting daily. Flamel looked stumped and was unable to explain why Harry was suddenly plagued with the head pain, but suggested Occlumency might help dull it.

And it did. Harry, on a cold, snowy March night, made a breakthrough with his Occlumency lessons, able to keep his stone walls up and shielding his mind while Flamel tried to slip past his mental defences.

"You're doing well, Harry," began Flamel, "But it won't stop Voldemort or Dumbledore or even Snape if they're really trying to read your mind. But it's enough to stop a subtle attack once you notice it."

"Good enough for now?" replied Harry, wincing and rubbing his forehead by his scar.

Flamel peered at him. "You alright?" he asked. "You've been doing that for the past hour, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "It's fine. I've just been having bad migraines. I'm stressed, I guess."

"Either you are, or you aren't. And most people know when they're stressed," chuckled Flamel. The older wizard slowly stood from his seat, his bones cracking. He stretched and smoothed down the dark blue robes he wore. "Continue to practice your Occlumency before bed, and you'll progress as time goes on."

Harry nodded and rose from his seat as well. Flamel's office was shrouded in darkness, as the winter sun had already set long ago. Both found it easier to work in the dark than in a lit room.

"By the way," began Flamel, as Harry was ready to leave the office, "Have you begun working your muscles to handle your sword?"

Harry turned and shook his head. "No. It's a broadsword so it's far too heavy for me to even try learning to work with it yet. I'd have to learn the basic steps first, anyway."

"And Sgt. Donahue's been busy?"

Harry frowned. "Well, he has his classes and he's usually watching me when I'm in the gym. I usually go swimming or do some light exercise."

"Compared to your nut-job exercises at the beginning of the year," commented Flamel idly, leaning against his cluttered desk.

Harry shot the Professor an unreadable look, which made the Alchemist laugh.

"Well, come back tomorrow, Harry. We'll start you on some fencing lessons and then work around your schedule and mine to fit an hour or so in for you. By the end of the year you might be able to learn the basics."

"I'm a quick study," argued Harry weakly, with a grin to indicate his thanks.

Flamel waved his hand in a "shooing" motion. "Be off with you."

Harry's grin turned into a large smile and he left the office.

Harry's headaches didn't go away. As April approached, Harry sent Hedwig off with a letter, telling Heather to make an appointment with

a doctor to prescribe him some stronger medication than what he could take at the school.

The constant, dull throb behind his eyes and at his temples was causing Harry to loose sleep, and he found himself thankful that he was on probation for the football and Quidditch teams. He would not be at his best game if he was still playing, and although he continued to train with the team, Harry's lack of sleep and low energy meant he was more of a liability than an asset.

Robert picked Harry up for Easter weekend and Harry spent the majority of the short break in his bed, under the covers with all his curtains closed. Heather, he knew, was especially worried about Harry, who seemed sick but had no fever or other symptoms except the agonising headaches.

She finally roused him from his bed to travel with her to see the doctor, who was just as perplexed as they were.

"And they just started this school year?" he asked, writing something down.

Harry nodded. "They're also increasing in strength." He paused. "You don't think it's a brain tumour, do you?"

Harry's eyes were wide in fright, but the doctor shook his head. "No. It just seems like you've got chronic migraines. Did your parents get them? It might be genetic."

"I wouldn't know," replied Harry stiffly. "They died when I was one, so I never knew them."

Doctor hummed sympathetically. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'll prescribe you something strong with a higher dose than what your school doctor has been giving you, along with some sleeping pills. It should last for the remainder of the year, so come back in the summer if it continues."

"Thanks," replied Harry, hopping off the bed and taking the sheet of paper from the doctor. He met Heather who took them straight to a

pharmacist to fill the order, and then straight to home so Harry could rest.

Occlumency, Harry found, helped the dull the throbbing pain of the headache, but it was still there, like an itch that wouldn't go away, no matter how long and hard you scratched at it. Occlumency did help Harry get more than three hours of sleep every night, however, so he dutifully continued his meditation and avoided the sleeping pills for as long as he could.

That Easter Monday was a quiet affair in the Woolworth household (Remus had business in London and couldn't make it that weekend).

Heather and Robert were worried about Harry and his headaches, having found no real answer for them. Sean did his best to assume the family with interesting things of note of his Charterhouse classmates, taking the attention off Harry (which the younger boy was most thankful for). Sirius happily indulged everyone about tales of the Marauders at Hogwarts and chuckled whenever appropriate during Sean's stories; Holly was babbling about Kindergarten and presented Harry with a hand-drawn picture of 'her family,' in which he and Sirius were included.

Touched, the Boy-Who-Lived promised to take the drawing back with him to Wyckham and tack it onto his message board.

That evening, after watching telly together, Heather left to put Holly to bed and Robert disappeared into his study to do some last-minute work. It left Sean and Harry together.

Harry didn't know Sean all that well, mainly because for ten months of the year they were both at boarding schools and during the summer they both had their clubs and activities – and interests that neither shared.

However, Harry felt some brotherly bonding had occurred over the winter holidays when they had their snowball fights and they went present shopping; Sean had never once alienated Harry from the Woolworth's or made Harry feel as though he was imposing on the family that existed together long before he arrived.

“Sean,” began Harry, “when we first met, you told me that you were learning to drive.”

Sean tensed and shifted his eyes away from Harry’s form to stare at the TV screen. “Yeah?”

“Well, you said something about how Robert might not teach you because you got into trouble?” Harry ventured, tentatively. “I was just wondering if everything turned out fine.”

Sean nodded, relaxing. “Yeah, it did.” He slanted a look at Harry, sighed, and then elaborated. “I got mixed up with some teens and hot-wired a car with them. I got caught by the bobbies and Robert got right pissed. He threatened to take my driving privileges away if I didn’t show that I could be responsible.”

“Have you seen them since? The kids?”

Here, Sean paused, and Harry knew the answer before his foster brother spoke.

“No,” the older teen lied.

Harry let him.

The first evening back at Wyckham, the throbbing of Harry’s headache intensified near two am, and he fumbled for the prescription bottle of sleeping pills on his bedside table. He popped two into his mouth and dry-swallowed, gritting his teeth in pain. It felt like his skull was splitting open, and vaguely Harry wondered if that was how the cruciatus curse felt.

Although he practiced Occlumency, the sleeping pills seemed to override his natural barriers and Harry found himself spiralling deep into a dream awash with dark colours and shadows.

Harry didn't know where he was. It appeared to be a small village, a tiny one that were picturesque and thrived on tourists or sheep farmers to pull in revenue. Harry passed a local pub, past several stores and began to leave the village, heading toward the forest and hills.

He shivered as he stepped through the gates of the local cemetery and stared in awe of the church, with its gothic structures and looming bell tower. In the moonlight, it cast a dark shadow across the headstones. Harry walked through the winding paths until he arrived at a single grave, where the end of the tower's shadow fell.

Harry bent to read the inscription and felt the hairs on his arms rise and a sudden chill seep into his bones.

Tom Riddle.

Standing quickly, Harry glanced around. A tug deep inside him, similar to that of a port-key, changed the scenery around him and he was then standing in a dilapidated room with a large hearth and armchair in front of it; a three-legged and tilting coffee table was placed against the far wall but nothing was on it. The floor and walls were made of wood, and the ceiling was high with cracks in the plaster.

"Is it ready?" a cold, high voice hissed.

Harry shivered.

"Y-yes, M-master, it is," replied a voice that seemed to stir a memory in Harry, but he couldn't place it. The man who spoke was short and balding, snivelling and bowing to whatever was in the armchair. His beady eyes were downcast and seemed watery.

"Good," the voice hissed again, coming from the armchair. Harry refused to move any closer, his instincts telling him to leave, to run, to wake up, to do anything as long as he left as soon as possible.

“Soon,” the cold voice continued, growing louder as it continued, until it was cackling at the end, “Soon things will be the way they should’ve been... soon.”

Harry woke, gasping for breath, his scar burning like it was on fire, with the room spinning and blurring.

A cold sweat broke across his skin and Harry fumbled for his glasses, pushed them on and scrambled out of bed. He threw the door open, ignoring Blaise’s “Harry, what’s up?” and dashed into the communal boy’s toilets.

He fell to his knees by a urinal in one of the stalls and threw up; he continued to dry-heave even as Blaise fell to his knees beside his friend, drawing his wand and murmuring a cooling charm on Harry.

“Thanks,” the emerald-eyed teen hoarsely whispered, his skin white and clammy.

“You okay?” asked Blaise, summoning a towel, and handing it to Harry.

“I think so,” replied Harry softly.

“What happened?”

“I had a dream.”

Blaise’s eyebrows rose. “That must’ve been some dream to make you react like this. Are you sure you’re not sick, too?”

“No.” Harry shook his head firmly. “It was the dream. My scar burned, Blaise. It burned when I woke up.”

Blaise’s worried expression took on a different degree. “Your scar?”

Harry nodded and caught Blaise’s eyes. Finally, Blaise fell heavily to his rear, next to Harry and sighed.

"You going to write to Sirius and the Woolworth's then?" he finally asked, his voice slightly detached.

Wiping his face, especially around his mouth, Harry replied, "Yeah. Yeah, I think I am." He sighed tiredly and leaned his head against the cool porcelain. "In the morning, though. Not now."

"No," he heard Blaise's voice agree, "Not now."

As Harry said, he sent two separate letters via Hedwig and Marius to the Woolworth's and Sirius, respectively, but both had nothing to say about his dream or his scar. Neither guardian of Harry's knew what was going on, but they all urged him to see Flamel and tell him what happened.

Having remembered what happened the last time he went off on his own without telling any adults, Harry accepted their words of wisdom and told Flamel about his dream and his reaction when he woke up.

A shrewd look appeared in Flamel's eyes when Harry told his dream, but the older wizard didn't explain his thoughts, except to tell Harry to continue his Occlumency and to avoid the sleeping pills for as long as he could.

"We'll try Dreamless Sleep if the pills don't work," the wizard said, slowly, stroking his short beard. "However... I think these aren't normal dreams, Harry. If that's the case, Dreamless and sleeping pills won't do anything. Only Occlumency can. We'll change our one-hour lessons to two, and I'll work you harder."

"Do you know what's happening?" asked Harry, finally, wringing his hands in his lap. He never wanted to feel that agonising pain again.

Flamel shook his head. "I have an idea, but I'm not entirely sure. I'll research it and once I think I have a solid idea, I'll let you know. Worse case, it'll be September when school starts. Some books that I need are probably in my library back in Toulouse."

Harry accepted the explanation and left the office, worried about his mental health. No one else had weird dreams like his, and Harry was beginning to wonder if there was more to some absorbed abilities of Voldemort's that Harry received that October evening.

Throughout May, Harry continued to feel restless and antsy, but he didn't have another dream like the one he had that Monday evening in April; he also received a few more hours of sleep but it didn't stop Blaise and Hermione from fretting over him.

Harry finally pleased with Susan to control Hermione – the only one who was able to calm the girl now when she was in full-blown panic mode (usually about exams), and Harry began to breathe easily again as Hermione backed off. Blaise, however, didn't; he hovered behind Harry constantly, as though he would drop dead at any second.

Or, he was doing it to avoid any projectile if Harry got sick. He wasn't actually sure which it was.

As June and the Junior Quidditch League approached, Harry remained benched (much to the surprise and annoyance of the media and international figures who began to invade England for the League). Aberclythe was chosen to host the League that year, so on June 2nd, the Quidditch team arrived in Wales, ready to play without their star player.

Aberclythe was small, a tiny manor house with many cottages scattered on the property for the students to live in. The grounds were vast, however, and hidden between lush, rolling hills and surrounded by forests on all sides of the property. The school was then hidden by several powerful wards.

Harry and his team mates would be spending the duration of the League in magical tents; at first unsure, Harry later learned that they were comfortable and spacious inside.

"I love magic," he commented, when he first saw the interior, gapping in surprise.

Blaise just laughed at him.

Harry cheered for his team from the sidelines, offering input to Oliver whenever he could. He was enjoying himself thoroughly, despite the constant headache he had. He was sure he'd rub the skin right off his forehead – he was rubbing over his lightning bolt scar constantly.

“Not playing, Harry?” asked Draco Malfoy, one evening as he and Theo Nott – who joined the team as a Chaser that year – stopped by the Wyckham tent.

Harry shook his head. “Sorry, no. I’ve been benched.”

“Benched?” asked Theo, in surprise. He raised a hand to tug at his dirty blond hair in surprise. “How come?”

“He got into a fight,” supplied Blaise when Harry wasn’t as forthcoming with the information.

Draco and Theo smirked at the Boy-Who-Lived. “With who?” asked Draco, almost in delight.

“Weasley,” again, Blaise spoke for his embarrassed friend, and then proceeded to tell Draco and Theo what happened back in March.

Draco was particularly happy for Ron Weasley’s misfortune, and after a few more minutes of chatting to their Wyckham friends, the two Hogwarts students left to return to their campsite.

“Why did you tell them?” asked Harry. “It shouldn’t have gone beyond our school. Now everyone at Hogwarts will know and you know that Percy Weasley is Head Boy there. Ron Weasley will have to deal with it being rubbed in his face at home this summer.”

“Oh, relax Harry,” chided Blaise, leaning back on his hands as he stared into the camp fire. Across of them, Oliver and Adrian were cooking hot dogs.

“Easy for you to say,” mumbled Harry, rubbing his scar, “you weren’t the one with a black eye.”

On the third and final day of the tournament, Hogwarts' seeker Cedric Diggory caught the Snitch, giving Hogwarts their first win of the League – but only by ten points ahead of Wyckham.

As those in the stands began to cheer and Aberclythe gamely shook their opponents' hands, Harry felt his scar explode in pain; his head was ripping in two, and as he grit his teeth and tried to bring up his Occlumency walls, Harry fell to his knees, and then slipped into unconsciousness.

When Harry woke up, he was back at Wyckham and Blaise, Hartz and Flamel were at his bedside, worried and harried expressions on their faces. When he opened his eyes, Hartz scrambled away to inform Healer McMillan he was awake.

Groaning, Harry sat up and mumbled, "What happened?"

"You passed out," supplied Blaise, lowly. His lips were all scarred from biting and worrying at them.

"From what?" asked Harry, rubbing the side of his head. "I felt like I was hit by a lorry. God, even my Occlumency walls weren't strong enough to hold the pain out."

"Nothing could've stopped the pain, Harry," said Flamel, quietly. He sat on Harry's right side, arms crossed and his eyes shuttered. "You experienced a backlash from Voldemort."

"Voldemort!" gapped the teen, glancing at Blaise and back at Flamel. "How?"

The Alchemist sighed, uncrossed his arms and leaned forward to stare intently at Harry. "It's your scar, Harry. It connects you to Voldemort in ways that I can't even begin to wonder. But I think, from your past encounters with him, it works as a warning system to when he's near by."

"So what, he was right behind me at Aberclythe?" asked Harry sarcastically, propping himself up on his arms.

Flamel shook his head. "No. I think you should read this, Harry, and then you'll understand."

The wizard then motioned at Blaise to hand Harry something, and Harry saw that his best friend was holding a rolled up edition of the Daily Prophet.

"Blaise?" questioned Harry, his voice wobbling. A part of him did not want to read the newspaper.

"I'm so sorry, Harry," Blaise murmured, as he passed the paper to his best friend.

Worried, and alarmed, Harry unfolded the newspaper and began to read.

On June 3rd, 1994, retired Auror Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody was abducted from his home in Reading, by several assailants. He put up a good fight before he was taken – alive – by his captives to Little Hangleton, where he was forced to partake in a ritual. The ritual involved was not disclosed by Moody or Dumbledore at the time of the press conference, but Moody was quite adamant that all his assailants were Death Eaters, acting under You-Know-Who's orders.

Moody managed to escape early that evening, but not before the ritual was completed. With Dumbledore's backing, Moody stated: "It's time to prepare for dark times. (You-Know-Who) is back."

"The Dark Mark was found later that evening by Aurors. It hung over the graveyard in Little Hangleton, Harry," said Flamel firmly, but softly.

Harry was staring at the paper in surprise. His hands shook slightly and he didn't notice Blaise call his name.

It didn't matter if Flamel was explaining to Harry what happened; it didn't matter if Blaise was worried and thought Harry had gone around the bend. Harry had more important things to worry about now.

Like the fact that Lord Voldemort was back.

AN: AS OF DECEMBER 2007:

Wow. When I first went I hiatus, I can assure you that it was about a month earlier than I had anticipated (as I was planning on taking a break regardless for school purposes – essays, projects, studying for tests, etc) but I was honest in also stating that some reviews had annoyed me.

I can still remember this one review I received after posting the second or third chapter about how, by law, Anita would be forced to report the Dursleys. While a part of me was thinking great catch! Thank you, another was a bit miffed and thinking well, fat lot of good that did Rowling, eh? But I learned from those reviews and I've come to realise that the majority of you out there who have – and without a doubt, you have – raised by doubts in the story's quality, are all quite right. I've listened to various authors who reviewed (and one in particular who did help me greatly with their review), and those who weren't authors but became some of the best support ever. Period.

So, as of today – December 20 2007, I am stating that chapter 24 is being written but is terribly slow at coming. Firstly, for the reason that I believe the characters are growing up and its time to introduce some...um... slangish dialects than just proper English; and because I am slightly stumped as to what I want to occur next. I have certain scenes that I am building up to – or have been written already – but I'm sometimes at a loss at how to get there!

Anyway: massive thanks to everyone who has remained with this story and its break. I appreciate every single one of the reviews left by you. Thank you, so very very much. Kneazle

Wyckham Academy / The Road Not Taken

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Chapter Twenty-Four

“... the Ministry of Magic has sent leaflets of protection to all magical households in the wake of You-Know-Who’s return to power. Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge has issued a decree of emergency, which includes a nine p.m. curfew in all public wizarding sectors such as Diagon Alley. Witches and Wizards are asked to ward their homes with the strongest magic they know and the Ministry has offered a subsidy for those who can’t afford more than G45 worth of warding. There have also been no recent reports of Death Eater activity within the last twenty-four hours, not since the attack on the Harcourt estate early yesterday morning...”

Harry tuned out the monotonous voice of the speaker on the Wizard Wireless and continued reading the latest defence strategy guide that Remus had sent for. Although still out of the country on numerous cases, Remus knew of the political tension in England and thought it best for Harry to learn to defend himself.

Sirius, on the other hand, spent the majority of his spare time bemoaning the fact that the Ministry was able to detect underage magic until Harry pointed out that all Wyckham students could counter that since their first potions class. Since then, Sirius had Harry up every morning at 6 for impromptu exercises and duels. Although Harry was still in top-form when it came to DADA, Sirius had been an Auror for two years before his incarceration and retained the majority of his skills.

In addition, Heather was quite smug when she confided to Harry that Sirius had spent the majority of Harry’s time away from home working on various exercise machines to build his body back up to its prime.

And Sirius thought he was still getting away with the “good, home-cooked meal” excuse. Harry decided to allow Sirius his delusions in the wake of everything. It was the least he could do, after all.

(Nov.6.08)

Unfortunately, this is all I have written, for the past year, of Wyckham Academy (now known as the Road Not Taken). I had two betas who managed to send me the first two chapters to edit and change but since then they've MIA.

I'd truly appreciate someone – or several someone's – who would like to take the time to help me edit and revise this story. Not to suit the last two HP books, as I have a large dislike of HBP and DH, but to ensure that my grammar is up to snuff, and that my continuity makes sense. Also, to Britpick. While I am Canadian and therefore there are some similarities, and I'm planning my move to England for 2009, I'm not fully involved with laws or slang beyond Bridget Jones, Georgia Nicholson, and my complete and utter love for (Richard Hammond) Top Gear (which is actually bad because I learn potty language from Jeremy Clarkson).

SO! If you are interested, please email me (kneazles at hotmail .com -- remove spaces, or see my profile) or PM me here on FFnet. I honestly don't have that much time now that I'm working 8-4 as an executive administrator for a shit boss, but I'd appreciate whatever help is available. Thanks!

CHP25